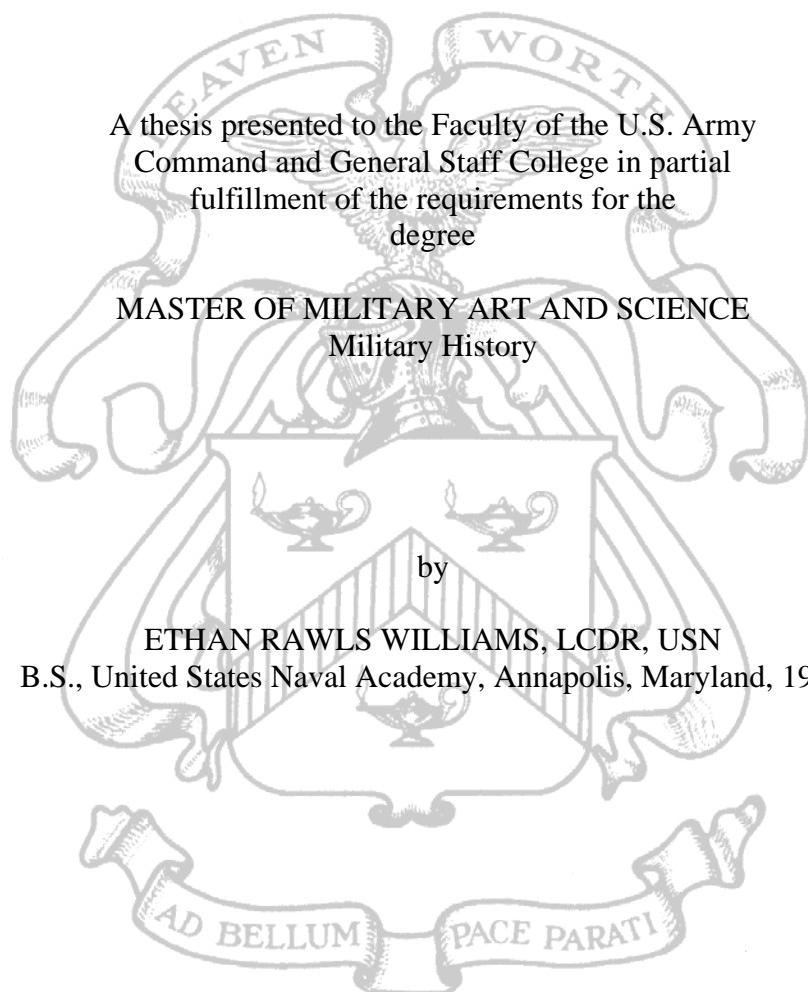


50 DIV IN NORMANDY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE
BRITISH 50th (NORTHUMBRIAN) DIVISION ON D-DAY
AND IN THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY



A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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B.S., United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, 1997

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50 DIV IN NORMANDY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BRITISH 50TH (NORTHUMBRIAN) DIVISION ON D-DAY AND IN THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY, by LCDR Ethan Rawls Williams, 124 pages.

In late 1943, the British army ordered the veteran 7th Armored, 51st (Highland), and 50th (Northumbrian) Divisions to return to the Great Britain to provide combat experienced troops for the invasion of northwest Europe. On D-Day, the 50th Division achieved nearly all of its objectives. By mid-June, however, the 50th held positions only a few miles beyond its final D-Day positions. The apparent failures of the veteran divisions in later operations led many senior leaders to believe that these divisions had become a liability. This thesis will evaluate the performance of the 50th Division in Normandy by first examining the period before the invasion to determine the 50th's readiness for war, British army doctrine, and weapons. The 50th's prior combat experiences and pre-invasion training will be analyzed to determine the effect that prior combat had on the division. Finally, this thesis will evaluate the performance of the 50th Division in specific combat engagements in Normandy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

You will enter the Continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.¹

Directive to Supreme Commander,
Allied Expeditionary Force
Issued February 12, 1944

At 4:45 a.m. on September 1, 1939, German forces attacked across the Polish border, igniting the Second World War. Later that same day, the British 50th (Northumbrian) Division received orders to mobilize. Two days later, Great Britain and France, bound by their obligations to Poland, declared war on Germany. The German “Blitzkrieg” invasion quickly overwhelmed the Polish defenders as Warsaw fell on September 27 and all resistance in Poland ceased a little over a week later. Fearing an attack in the west, Great Britain and France mobilized and deployed their forces to the French border, and waited for the German invasion in the west. That invasion came on May 10, 1940. Circumventing the impressive Maginot Line, the German forces attacked through Belgium and Holland. After easily defeating the Dutch and Belgian armies, the Germans continued the offensive, driving a wedge between the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) and the French forces in northern France. Elements of the 2nd Panzer Division reached the coast of the English Channel on May 19, isolating over 300,000 British and French troops in the north of France.² Following a failed attempt by the 50th Division to break through the German penetration and link up with the French army in the south, those trapped forces began a withdrawal north to the coast.

At the port city of Dunkirk and along the adjacent beaches, the “Miracle of Dunkirk” occurred as nearly 337,000 B.E.F. and French soldiers were evacuated to Britain.³ While the Royal Navy performed superbly in its mission to rescue the trapped soldiers from northern France, the battle in France and the evacuation can only be viewed as a massive defeat. It took only three weeks for the Germans to defeat the B.E.F. and it was only another two weeks before Paris was captured. France surrendered to Germany on June 22, 1940. War continued to rage in Europe, however, for the next five years, engulfing the entire continent—from the Atlantic Ocean to Moscow and from Norway to North Africa.

Following their defeat in France, the British focused their efforts on the Mediterranean, fighting the Germans in North Africa, Crete, and Greece. In June, 1941, Germany opened a second front when it attacked the Soviet Union. Later that same year, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor officially brought the United States into the war. At the Arcadia Conference, held in Washington, D.C., two weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill presented his strategic plan for the defeat of Germany:

1. A naval blockade of the Axis countries
2. An intense bombing campaign against Germany
3. Break the German people’s will to fight through propaganda and encourage rebellion within occupied nations
4. Landings by small armored and mechanized forces throughout Europe from Norway to Greece
5. A large and “decisive assault” upon German controlled Europe.⁴

To accomplish the “decisive assault” on Germany, American and British planners developed the framework for an invasion in the spring of 1943. This plan consisted of Operation Bolero, the build up of men and materials in Great Britain; Operation Roundup, the cross channel landing in Northern France in 1943; and the beach head consolidation and advance into Germany. Immediately there were concerns regarding the timing of Roundup. The Americans desired an earlier invasion, as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt believed that it was “of the highest importance that U.S. ground troops be brought into action against the enemy in 1942.”⁵ British planners opposed this early invasion. With America still mobilizing for war, Britain would be required to supply the majority of the men and materiel for the initial effort. Furthermore, the British feared that a premature invasion would either lead to a static front and a return to the horrors of trench warfare seen in World War I or result in another evacuation like Dunkirk. The planners agreed that the invasion of Europe would have to wait, but a second front against Germany was still needed to ease the pressure on the Soviet Union and to satisfy political requirements at home. The British, already engaged in northeastern Africa, proposed a 1942 invasion of northwestern Africa by Allied forces. The Africa plan was soon adopted and on November 8, 1942, Operation Torch commenced with landings at Algiers, Oran, and Casablanca.⁶

In 1943, the tide turned against Germany. Allied forces, which included the 50th Division, defeated the German Afrika Korps in the Tunisian desert and the Soviets handed Germany heavy defeats at Stalingrad and Kursk. In July, the Allies, with the 50th Division in the lead, landed on Sicily and were preparing for further operations in Italy.

The Allies, though, realized that despite their successes in the Mediterranean, the liberation of Europe still required a landing somewhere in northwest Europe.

The diversion of men and materiel to Operation Torch pushed any chance of executing Operation Roundup to 1944. This delay, however, had several advantages for the Allies in the west. The Soviets would continue to wear down the German army on the Eastern Front, the Allied air forces would launch a combined strategic bombing campaign against Germany and would gain air superiority over the Luftwaffe, and the U-Boat threat would be eliminated. American war production would be given more time to build up men and machines for the invasion and the Allies would have more time for training and planning.

On March 13, 1943, Lieutenant General Frederick E. Morgan was named the Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC) and formed a combined Anglo-American planning staff. While the Supreme Commander was yet unidentified, COSSAC issued its first directive on April 26, 1943, which, among other things, gave guidance to plan for a major invasion in France as early as possible in 1944.⁷ The COSSAC staff, analyzing the entire coast of northwest Europe, quickly identified two potential landing sites. The Caen sector of Normandy was selected over the closer, yet heavily defended Pas de Calais. COSSAC developed a plan that called for an initial assault of three divisions from the sea with coordinated airborne and commando operations. Churchill and Roosevelt approved this plan at the Quadrant Conference in August, 1943. On December 6, 1943, the Allies appointed General Dwight D. Eisenhower as the Supreme Allied Commander for what was now known as Operation

Overlord and the COSSAC staff became SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.

To lead the ground forces in the invasion, the Allies appointed General Bernard L. Montgomery as the commander of the 21st Army Group (see Appendix A for the D-Day organization of the 21st Army Group). Montgomery, having distinguished himself as a division commander in France in 1940 and as 8th Army commander in North Africa and Italy, immediately made several proposals to General Eisenhower on the invasion plan. His recommendations to expand the seaborne divisions from three to five and to extend the invasion area to include the east coast of the Cotentin peninsula were quickly incorporated into the Overlord plan. The expansion of the plan, however, required additional shipping, which pushed the target invasion date from May to June, 1944.

While the SHAEF staff continued planning for the assault, units in Britain continued training and preparing for what would be their first combat in four years. Three divisions, however, were not strangers to combat. Having been in battle since 1940 and proven themselves in North Africa and the Mediterranean, the 7th Armored Division (the “Desert Rats”), the 51st (Highland) Division, and the 50th (Northumbrian) Division returned to Britain in late 1943 to provide combat experienced troops for Overlord. For the 50th Division, D-Day marked the start of their fifth year in combat, making them the most combat experienced division in the British army.

On the morning of June 6, 1944, four years after the “Miracle of Dunkirk,” the British 50th (Northumbrian) Division prepared to land on a stretch of French coastline in Normandy codenamed “Gold Beach” as one of the assault divisions in Operation Overlord. The last time the 50th Division saw France was on June 2, 1940, when the

division departed from Dunkirk. Several miles to the east, the British 3rd Infantry Division, another veteran unit from Dunkirk, prepared to land on Sword Beach. While the 3rd Division spent the previous four years in training and preparing for the Normandy invasion, the 50th Division fought in North Africa and Sicily. This combat experience was one reason that Montgomery selected the 50th to be an assault division on D-Day.⁸ As commander of the 3rd Infantry Division in May, 1940, Montgomery fought along side the 50th Division in northern France. Later, as commander of the 8th Army, the 50th served under his command in North Africa and Sicily. For the invasion of France and the subsequent operations to liberate Europe to succeed, Montgomery desired seasoned, combat experienced troops to take the lead while the green divisions that had been training for the past four years got their bearings and gained combat experience.

On the first day of Overlord, the 50th Division proved Montgomery correct. The division achieved nearly all of its objectives and was in position to complete the remainder the following morning. On D-Day, one 50th Division soldier displayed extraordinary heroism and earned the Victoria Cross, Great Britain's highest award for gallantry. By mid-June, however, the division was engaged in a bloody battle of attrition with German armored forces and held positions only a few miles beyond their final D-Day positions. Criticism of the veteran divisions began to emerge. The failures of the 7th Armored, 50th, and 51st Divisions in mid-June operations and apparent lack of forward progress in July led many senior leaders to believe that these divisions, thought to be an asset before D-Day due to their combat experience, had become a liability. Many thought that these units had lost their combat edge and were no longer effective.

Consequently, the 50th Division assumed a supporting role while fresher units took the lead in operations during the later phases of the fighting in Normandy.

Many historians have analyzed the British performance in the campaign on the larger scale, focusing on Montgomery and operations at the 21st Army Group level.⁹ At the center of the debate is Montgomery's plan for the conduct of the battle. When the British 3rd Infantry Division failed to take Caen on D-Day and subsequent attempts to take the city and break out of the initial lodgment in mid-June failed, the British appeared to be stalemated.¹⁰ Montgomery claimed that this was all part of his original plan: to project the threat of breakout in the east in order to pin down the German forces, specifically the Panzer divisions.¹¹ With British and Canadian forces fixing the Germans in the east, the Americans in western Normandy would have greater opportunity to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula, capture the port of Cherbourg, and breakout to the south, swinging about the anchor provided by the British forces in the east for the drive on Paris. Later historians, however, have been critical of Montgomery's handling of the campaign. They have argued that by failing to take Caen and the areas south of the city early in the battle, Montgomery left no option for a breakout in the east and forced the Americans to achieve the breakout in the west.¹² Once the Americans broke out, the British and Canadian forces in the east were able to press forward, but this was only a result of the German withdrawal to re-establish their lines in the face of the American advance.

Critics of the British army have repeatedly focused on two pieces of evidence when discussing its performance in Normandy.¹³ The first is a captured report from the

Panzer Lehr Division, a unit the 50th Division faced throughout the Normandy campaign.

The report, while praising British tank crews, states, among other things, that

The fighting spirit of the British inf(antry) is not very great. They rely largely on the art(iller)y and air force s(u)p(ort). In the case of well-directed art(iller)y fire by us they often abandon their pos(itio)n in flight. The enemy is extraordinarily nervous of close combat. Whenever the enemy inf(antry) is energetically engaged they mostly retreat or surrender.¹⁴

The second source frequently referred to by critics is a report written by Brigadier James Hargest, New Zealand army observer to XXX Corps, the 50th Division's higher headquarters. In one example, Hargest comments about officers from the 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, and how he could pick out each one in the field from a distance of 600-800 yards due to the sun's reflection off their map boards.¹⁵ Historians, such as Carlo D'Este in Decision in Normandy, have cited this as evidence of the lack of tactical skill within the 50th Division.¹⁶

These sources, however, must be approached carefully. The Panzer Lehr report only covers June 6-30, 1944, when the German writers had their own agendas and morale issues to contend with. By highlighting the weaknesses of the British soldier, senior German officers attempted to bolster the morale of their own men.¹⁷ The Hargest report only covers June 6-July 10, 1944, again not giving a full account of the 50th's actions throughout the campaign. Furthermore, critics of the British performance fail to mention that on the same page as the Durham Light Infantry criticism, Hargest's first sentence is "50 Div fights well..."¹⁸ Also overlooked is the praise Hargest gives for two 50th Division units, the 69th Brigade and the 151st Brigade, for their effective use of combined arms tactics.

At the other end of the chain of command, there are numerous regimental histories that focus on specific brigades and battalions. While these regimental histories are a rich source for details of the battle, they contain very little analysis or candid evaluation of the unit's performance. If any evaluation is included, the conclusions are usually positive since many of the regimental historians were veterans of the campaign or the history was published by the regiment itself. For example, W.A.T. Synge states that two 69th Brigade units, the 6th and 7th Battalions, The Green Howards, "had acquitted themselves like heroes, and proved their superiority" over the Germans in Normandy.¹⁹

There are several noteworthy books specifically about the 50th Division. *The Path of the 50th*, written in 1947 by 50th Division veteran Ewart Clay, is the primary reference that researchers have used for information on the division. While full of details and first hand accounts, *The Path of the 50th* falls into the category of the regimental histories mentioned above. There is little or no critical analysis, but Clay states in the Introduction that the book "is intended to be a plain and accurate account of the war record of the 50th Division."²⁰ Published nearly fifty years after Clay's book, B.S. Barnes' *The Sign of the Double 'T'* focuses on the 50th in Sicily and northwest Europe. Drawing from Clay's work and the many regimental histories published since the end of the war, Barnes produced a detailed work with numerous additional first person accounts, but, like Clay's work, it lacks critical analysis. Patrick Delaforce's *Monty's Northern Legions* tells the story of both the 50th Division and the 15th Scottish Division in World War II. Primarily citing Clay and Barnes' books, Delaforce's work likewise contains little analysis. In 1966, at the direction of the General Officer Commanding of the 50th Division, Majors A.H.R. Baker and B. Rust produced *A Short History of the 50th Northumbrian Division*.

This 72 page book traces the 50th from its inception in 1908 to 1966. While only four and a half pages are devoted to operations in Normandy, the book is a valuable reference for the 50th Division researcher as it contains all of the major dates, places, and names in the division's history.

There exists a gap in the history of the 50th Division, as there is no critical assessment of the division's performance in Normandy. To fill that gap in the historical record, this thesis will evaluate the effectiveness of the 50th Division in the battle of Normandy. First, the period before the invasion will be examined to determine the division's preparedness for war, to include combined arms training, British army doctrine and its implementation within the division, and weapons. The experiences and performances of the division in France (1940), North Africa, Sicily, and in pre-invasion training will then be analyzed to determine the effect that combat experience had on the division. Finally, by studying specific combat engagements, the performance of the 50th Division in Normandy will be evaluated. Through an investigation of its adherence to doctrine, combined arms integration, and an understanding of the constraints placed on the division by higher headquarters, this thesis will support that the 50th Division performed well in the Normandy Campaign. While the 50th Division was not perfect in its execution of the battle and did have setbacks, this thesis argues that the criticism directed towards its performance is a by-product of the disapproval of Montgomery's operational technique and, to a lesser extent, the highly publicized failures of fellow North Africa veterans 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) Divisions.

¹L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West* (London: HMSO, 1962), 499.

²J. Benoist-Mechin, *Sixty Days that Shook the West* (Oxford: Jonathan Cape, 1963), 124.

³W.J.R. Gardner, ed., *The Evacuation from Dunkirk: 'Operation Dynamo', 26 May-4 June 1940* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 209-210.

⁴Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 3, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), 645-659.

⁵Ellis, 8.

⁶Ibid., 8-9.

⁷Ibid., 10.

⁸CAB 106/1060: Reports on the Normandy campaign 1944 June 6-July 10, by Brigadier James Hargest, New Zealand Army Observer with 30th Corps.

⁹See Carlo D'Este's *Decision in Normandy* (London: Penguin Books, 1983) and Max Hastings' *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

¹⁰Stephen T. Powers, "The Battle of Normandy: The Lingering Controversy." *The Journal of Military History* 56, no. 3 (July, 1993): 455-456.

¹¹Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, K.G. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958) Ch. 14 passim.

¹²Powers, 467.

¹³David French, "Tommy Is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1996), 155.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵CAB 106/1060.

¹⁶D'Este, 280.

¹⁷French, 155.

¹⁸CAB 106/1060. On August 12, 1944, Hargest was killed while making a farewell visit to the 50th Division.

¹⁹W.A.T. Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards, 1939-1945* (Richmond: The Green Howards, 1952), 325.

²⁰E.W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950), 1.

CHAPTER 2

FOUNDATIONS AND FIRST BATTLES

I like to have 50 Division with me wherever I go.¹

General Bernard L. Montgomery
Commander, British 8th Army,
August 30, 1943, to a formation of
50th Division's 151st Brigade

Introduction

Before analyzing the 50th Division's performance in Normandy, it is important to examine the experiences of the division prior to D-Day. As a “veteran” division, both pre-invasion planners and post-Normandy critics had certain expectations of the 50th. Therefore, the critical analysis of the division prior to D-Day that follows will provide clearer understanding of the 50th's capabilities and limitations. After an examination of British doctrine, this chapter will cover the division from its mobilization in September, 1940, to its return from combat in the Mediterranean in November, 1943. The subsequent chapter will detail the division's pre-invasion training in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, these chapters will argue that the 50th Division that landed in Normandy, having undergone significant changes in both personnel and tactical capabilities, was no better prepared for the fighting in the hedgerows of Normandy than a green division.

The Interwar Years and Doctrinal Development

For the British, the name “Passchendaele” symbolizes the horrors of World War I. Lasting only three months, the 1917 battle near the Belgian town of Passchendaele cost British and Allied forces nearly 300,000 men and saw the first use of mustard gas by the

Germans. The “Spectre of Passchendale” remained in the British national psyche throughout the years following World War I as they prepared for the next war. Eager to avoid the carnage of the Western Front, Great Britain adopted a national defense strategy that focused on the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force to protect the home islands. Should war on the continent come, Britain planned to contribute with its air and naval forces while continental allies fought on the land. Should the requirement for land forces develop, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force would buy the nation time to mobilize the army and industry.²

With this basic defense strategy, it follows that the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force received the majority of the intellectual effort and defense spending as Britain bolstered its first line of defense. The army’s role in the interwar period, however, was not as grand. Holding numerous colonies throughout the world, the British army served as the constabulary for the Empire. With a large amount of its forces in far away places like Africa and Asia, the British army focused on quelling civil disturbances, not fighting a continental war.³ Ultimately, the British decision to not make a military commitment to the continent weakened the offensive capabilities of its army; thus the British army entered World War II with a doctrine oriented towards the defense.⁴

While nations such as Germany embraced the idea of the tank and mechanized warfare, the British army’s role in the colonies limited its ability to transform. Imperial policing required large amounts of infantry and the supply and maintenance of elaborate machinery half a world away in places such as India or Palestine was difficult. Subsequently, the British army adopted equipment that was transportable by ship and easily maintained. This constraint significantly impacted the British army’s decision to

mechanize or motorize its forces.⁵

Simply put, *mechanization* is a doctrinal concept where soldiers fight from their vehicles. *Motorization* is a technological concept where soldiers merely use their vehicles for transportation to the fight. Both concepts appealed to senior British officers who believed that this new found mobility would prevent a return to the static trench warfare of World War I. By the end of the 1930s, the British army had motorized most of its divisions.⁶ Mechanization, however, was slower in its adoption. Despite the efforts of armor advocates J.F.C. Fuller, Basil Liddell-Hart, and Percy Hobart, senior army leadership, with overseas requirements in mind, maintained a conservative approach towards modernization, failing to embrace the tactical advantages offered by mechanization.⁷ As late as 1937, a mere two years before the German invasion of Poland and roughly twenty years since the arrival of the tank on the battlefield, the British army spent £20,000 for 38 students to attend horse riding school, while funding only £46,000 for 550 students to attend the Tank Corps School.⁸

Although the British army was slow to transform, it did understand the importance of mobility and its impact on combined arms warfare. The 1929 edition of *Field Service Regulations* emphasizes that, while infantry is “the arm which confirms the victory and holds the ground won,” victory is achieved through combined arms cooperation.⁹ Furthermore, Volume Two of the War Office’s *Infantry Training* stresses that “to attempt movement, inadequately prepared and insufficiently supported by fire, is to risk a premature check.”¹⁰ Not equipped with adequate organic firepower, the infantry unit was forced to look outside its organization to find that fire support.

The British infantryman fought World War II with the same rifle his father used

in World War I—the bolt action 1903 Lee Enfield. While auto loading rifles were available, they were not adopted by the army for two reasons. First, the fiscally minded His Majesty’s Treasury would not permit the scrapping of large stocks of World War I rifles and the purchase of new rifles, and second, the British army determined that an auto loading rifle would lead to a decrease in aimed fire and thus a larger expenditure of ammunition. Supplying units with large amounts of ammunition requires a larger logistics chain, which the army saw as a constraint to its desired mobility.¹¹

The German army went to war with the bolt action Mauser Karabiner 98k, a variant of the Gewehr 98 used in World War I. To augment the firepower in its infantry units, however, the German army deployed the MG 34 machine gun and later in the war, the MG 42. While the British army had the Bren Light Machine Gun, it was no match for the MG 34 or 42. The magazine fed Bren could not generate the sustained firepower that the belt fed German machine guns produced, nor could it match the devastating physical and psychological effects of the MG 34 or 42.

In 1944 the British infantryman used the PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) to fight tanks. In theory, this high explosive projectile could penetrate 100 millimeters of armor from 100 yards. The weapon, however, was difficult to use and unreliable. A skilled PIAT shooter could normally hit a 100 yard target in only six out of ten attempts. Of those hits, one out of every four did not detonate. To counter the PIAT, German tankers installed light armored skirts around their tanks, detonating the PIAT before it hit the hull or tracks of the tank.¹²

Tests in 1944 revealed that infantry armed with only Enfield rifles, Sten submachine guns, and Bren machine guns had to fire at maximum rate (or higher) to

neutralize enemy troops in trenches or pill boxes. Therefore, British infantry relied on indirect fire support to defeat the enemy. The British battalion commander, though, was also at a significant disadvantage to his German opponent with respect to organic indirect fires. While each British infantry platoon had one two inch mortar and the battalion mortar platoon had two three inch mortars, a German battalion commanded six 81mm mortars. Thus the British infantry unit relied on the division's artillery and attached armor for its fire support. Although artillery units were not part of an infantry brigade, they were still organic to the infantry division. British armor units, however, were organized differently. While British doctrine emphasized the importance of infantry and armor cooperation, tanks were organized outside of the infantry division. By creating independent armor brigades, the army limited the opportunities for soldiers and tankers to live, train, and learn together.¹³

Combined infantry-armor doctrine underwent numerous changes throughout World War II, as commanders could not agree on which element should lead the attack. The British 21st Army Group, the invasion force training in the United Kingdom, published *The Cooperation of Tanks with Infantry Divisions in Offensive Operations* in late 1943.¹⁴ This pamphlet stated that the determination of the lead element in an assault depended on factors such as terrain and enemy considerations, especially the presence of anti-tank weapons. This contrasted with the infantry-armor guidance of General Bernard L. Montgomery's 8th Army, published in November, 1943. The 8th Army, drawing on its combat experience in North Africa, stated that tanks should lead the assault with infantry in a follow-up role. When Montgomery took command of 21st Army Group in January, 1944, he immediately overturned the group's previous doctrine and published *Notes on*

the Employment of Tanks in Support of Infantry in Battle which, like his previous 8th Army doctrine, placed tanks in the lead with infantry units in trail. Ironically, after fighting in Sicily and Italy, the 8th Army published new infantry-armor guidance during the summer of 1944. With Montgomery no longer in command, 8th Army directed that in a combined attack, infantry should normally lead the tanks. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to thoroughly analyze the development of British infantry-armor doctrine, it is important to note that even after four years of war, the British army did not have a coherent doctrine for combined infantry-armor operations, let alone a unified application of that doctrine within the army.¹⁵

While the senior leaders of the British army developed doctrine, the individual unit commander interpreted and implemented that doctrine as he saw fit.¹⁶ Consequently, many units did not embark on a combined arms training plan, instead continuing to utilize the traditional infantry tactics in which they were proficient and comfortable. Not until Montgomery took command of the 8th Army in North Africa did the British army have a commander who demanded a singular interpretation and application of doctrine. Unfortunately, this firm guidance from senior leadership did not come until the third year of the war. With pre-war commanders allowed to individually tailor their training programs, units focused on the familiar routines they had trained with since 1918. Subsequently, the British army entered World War II with tactics and weapons that had barely changed since World War I.¹⁷

The 50th (Northumbrian) Division—Tyne and Tees

The 50th (Northumbrian) Division was a Territorial Army unit based in the northeast English region that was the historic kingdom of Northumbria.¹⁸ The divisional

symbol, “TT,” represents two of the three major rivers flowing through the division’s area, the Tyne and the Tees. When rotated left, the interlocking “TT” emblem forms an “H,” representing the third major river in Northumbria, the Humber (see figure 1). The “Sign of the Double T,” marking the division’s route inland from Gold Beach, is still visible on certain buildings in Normandy today.

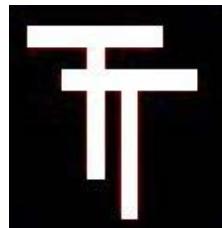


Figure 1. Unit Emblem of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division.

Formed in 1908, the division fought in World War I, including the battles of Ypres, the Somme, Arras, and the Aisne. Despite being a Territorial Army formation, the division remained at a relatively high strength following the war and maintained its readiness through annual training camps, with other training and social events throughout the year. As part of the British army modernization, the 50th reorganized in 1938 as a motor infantry division. Intended to be a more agile formation, the division contained only two infantry brigades (150th York and Durham Infantry Brigade and 151st Durham Light Infantry Brigade), two regiments of field artillery, and support units including transportation, supply, engineers, medical, and signals (see Appendices B and C for organizational charts of the 50th Division).

With war on the continent looming, the 50th Division mobilized on September 1, 1939, and moved to Cotswold County for training in October. Having completed battalion, brigade, and division level training in the spring of 1939, the division had planned to conduct combined infantry-armor training. This valuable training did not

occur, however, due to an army-wide lack of equipment. In September, 1939, the Quartermaster General could only fully equip the four regular army divisions, forcing the Territorial Army divisions to train with just rifles, personal equipment, and uniforms as they waited for the rest of their supplies which, in some cases, took months to arrive.¹⁹ Even without the desired combined infantry-armor training, the 50th Division received orders to make final preparations for the movement to France to join the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.). Following an inspection by King George VI, the 50th arrived in Cherbourg, France, on January 19, 1940.

With the B.E.F. in France, 1940

Following a month of unit level training near Amiens, the division moved forward to a position near Lille where it constructed defenses along the II Corps reserve line (see figure 2). Although Great Britain and France had been at war with Germany since September, 1939, there had been no fighting along the Western Front. British and French troops used this time, known as the “Phony War” or “Sitzkrieg,” to train and prepare defensive positions along the Belgian border. With the impressive Maginot Line guarding France’s border with Germany, the Allies expected the German attack to come through Belgium and Holland. To counter this attack, the Allies developed “Plan D.” Once the German attack commenced, the British and French forces would abandon the defenses they had spent so many months in preparing and move forward through Belgium. Meeting the Germans on the River Dyle, British and French forces would occupy defensive positions the Belgians had reportedly prepared.²⁰

At 6:30 A.M. on May 10, 1940, General Headquarters transmitted the codeword “Birch”—the anticipated German attack had finally come. Accordingly, the B.E.F. and

French forces crossed the Belgian border and moved towards their positions on the River Dyle. The 50th Division, however, remained the corps reserve and continued to train and, on occasion, conduct searches for reported enemy paratroopers.

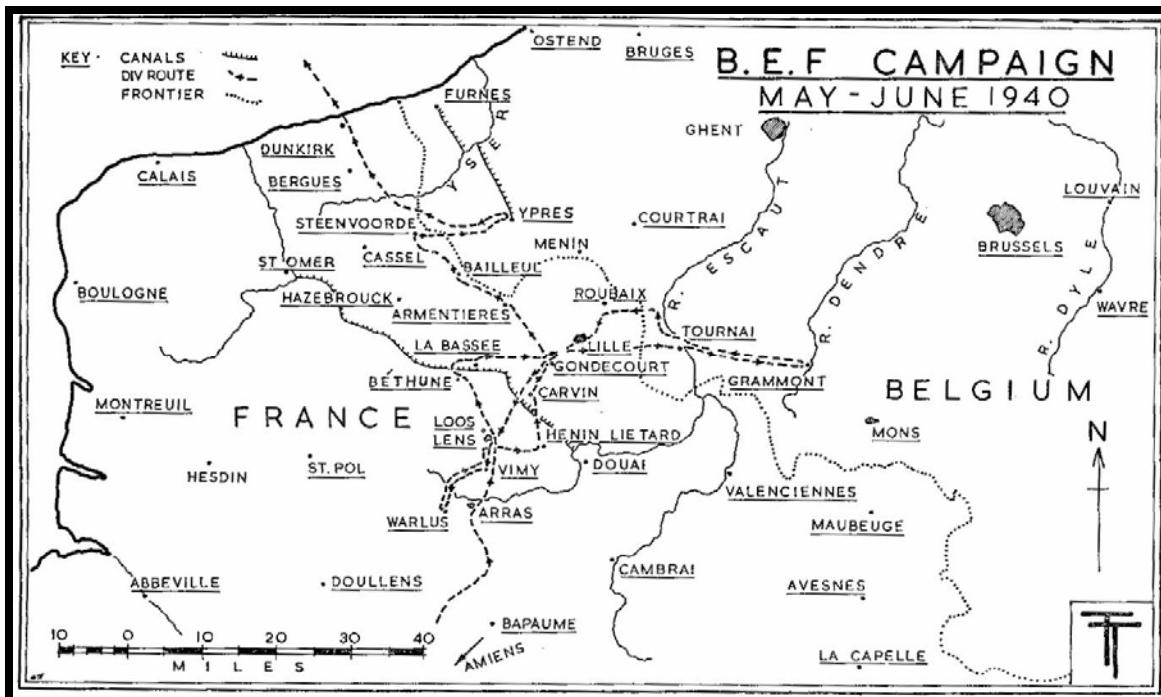


Figure 2. The 50th Division in France and Belgium, May-June, 1940.

Source: Major A.H.R. Baker and Major B. Rust, *A Short History of the 50th Northumbrian Division* (Berwick-Upon-Tweed: The Tweeddale Press LTD., 1966), 32.

On May 16, the division received orders to move forward and took position along the River Dendre. Later that afternoon, however, General Lord Gort, commander of the B.E.F., ordered a withdrawal; its southern flank held by the French 1st and 9th Armies had broken under the strain of General Heinz Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps. The 50th Division, having occupied its forward positions for only two days, received a series of orders directing it to fall back to the west.

In the third week of May, 1940, the German army, having scythed through the French 1st and 9th Armies, approached the French coast. The B.E.F. and the remnants of

the French 1st Army, fearing that they would be cut off from their Allies in the south, planned a combined attack at Arras to break through the German corridor, disrupt lines of communication, and ultimately link up with Allied forces in the south. For the attack, the British provided the 5th and 50th Divisions and the 1st Army Tank Brigade. The French could only muster an infantry division and a severely weakened armor division.

The final elements of the 50th arrived near Arras in the early hours of May 21. With the attack scheduled for later that day, Major-General Giffard Le Quesne Martel, General Officer Commanding of the 50th Division, ordered his commanders and soldiers to get maximum rest during the night. Furthermore, he directed that no attack planning would take place until after the 7:30 A.M. Brigade Commanders' meeting. The division was to cross the start line at 2:00 P.M. That start line, however, was eight miles away. At a 6:00 A.M. planning meeting, General Harold E. Franklyn, General Officer Commanding of the 5th Division and overall commander of the Arras operation, denied Martel's request for a later start time for the operation. When the battalions finally received their orders at 9:45 A.M., they immediately moved towards the start line, on foot, eight miles away.

The attack consisted of two columns, each led by infantry from the 151st Brigade, sweeping from the west to the southeast of Arras. Once the operation began, the attached Royal Tank Regiment tanks quickly outran the 151st Brigade's infantry. Although the heavily armored tanks made significant initial gains, they soon met highly effective anti-tank fire from the Germans. Without infantry or the promised air and artillery support, the attack lost its momentum. By the time the 151st Brigade caught up with its tanks, the Arras attack had been stopped.²¹

Despite the daytime successes of the 50th, the Germans launched a heavy counterattack that evening. A combined arms attack, led by Stuka dive-bombers and followed by tanks with supporting infantry, raged through the night. The German forces proved too strong for the tired British, who were forced to withdraw back to their start lines.

On May 22, following the failed Battle of Arras, the 50th Division withdrew north towards Dunkirk to avoid encirclement. German forces reached the English Channel, effectively isolating the B.E.F. and some French forces from the rest of the Allied armies to the south. On May 25, the 50th and 5th Divisions moved to fill a gap in the Dunkirk perimeter left by crumbling Belgian forces. In two days of bitter fighting, the 50th successfully held the line, preventing a strong German thrust towards Dunkirk.²²

On May 28, the 50th Division moved into the Dunkirk perimeter for the evacuation to Great Britain. For the next three days, the division held its part in the defensive line while the Royal Navy, aided by small boats, evacuated over 300,000 British and French soldiers to Britain. During the night of June 2, 1940, the 50th Division completed its embarkation and sailed for England, one of the last divisions to leave Dunkirk.²³

While the army suffered a tremendous loss in terms of men and equipment, it took away many lessons that would influence fighting during the rest of the war. The rapid pace of the German assault exploited the weaknesses of the B.E.F.'s antiquated command, control, and communications network which still utilized runners instead of radios. The British learned that defense in depth was essential to defeat Panzer attacks, and that new tactics were required to defeat the combination of Panthers and their

supporting infantry. With those new tactics came the requirement for greater numbers of tanks and anti-tank guns. Unfortunately, with limited transport space, the British army destroyed most of its materiel within the Dunkirk perimeter in order to prevent capture by the enemy. Overall, the British lost an estimated eight to ten divisions' worth of equipment in northern France. Following the evacuation at Dunkirk, the British army possessed only fifty modern tanks, could only fully equip one division, and provide enough ammunition for ten days of intense fighting.²⁴

For the 50th Division, the Battle of Arras was a costly learning experience. Major-General Franklyn's decision to launch the attack later in the day from a start line eight miles away doomed the operation from the beginning. While providing needed rest to the division, Major-General Martel's decision not to begin planning until the morning of the attack wasted valuable preparation time. With a significant distance to the start line, the 50th Division spent its precious planning time on the morning of May 21 marching to the battle. The major consequence of the rushed timeline was the lack of infantry-armor coordination prior to the fight. For the 50th, the Battle of Arras was its first time working with, and against, armored forces. This lack of experience proved costly and highlighted an army-wide deficiency in combined arms cooperation.²⁵ The operation was not a total failure however, as the 50th Division inflicted heavy casualties on the Germans, took over 400 prisoners, and destroyed over twenty tanks. The Arras attack delayed the German capture of Calais by two days and bought valuable time for the eventual B.E.F. evacuation.²⁶ Additionally, the 50th Division's opponent at Arras was the 7th Panzer Division, led by Major General Erwin Rommel—the German commander the 50th would meet again and again over the next four years.

North Africa and Sicily, 1941-1943

Following the evacuation from Dunkirk, the 50th Division moved to the Dorset coast in the south of England to defend against the expected German invasion. With most of its motor transport still in France, the division reorganized as an infantry division, receiving the 69th Brigade from the recently disbanded 23rd (Northumbrian) Division (see Appendix B).²⁷ Now reformed with three infantry brigades, the division received word in September, 1940, that it would deploy to North Africa in April, 1941 (see figure 3).

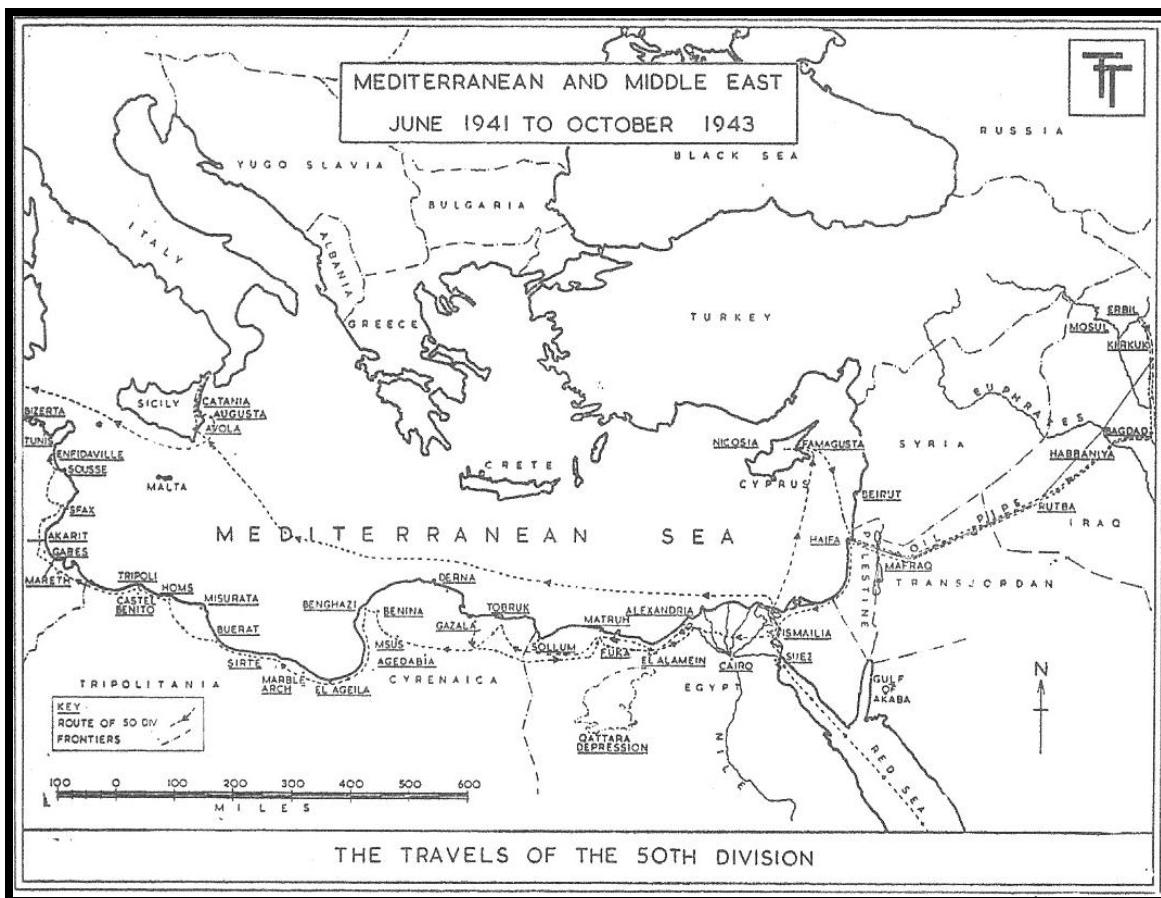


Figure 3. The 50th Division in the Mediterranean, 1941-1943.

Source: Major A.H.R. Baker and Major B. Rust, *A Short History of the 50th Northumbrian Division* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: The Tweeddale Press LTD., 1966), 36.

Before the division arrived in North Africa, however, it was first diverted to Cyprus and then to Iraq to build defenses against a possible German thrust through Persia. The 50th Division finally reached North Africa in February, 1942, and took its place in the British defensive line near Gazala. Once established, the division strengthened its positions and conducted regular patrols, believing that an attack was imminent. The German Afrika Korps and Italian forces, led by now Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel, confirmed their suspicion. The Axis forces attacked on the night of May 26, attempting to split the Gazala Line between the 150th and 69th Brigades. Fearing an Axis breakthrough, the 8th Army ordered the 150th Brigade to defend at all costs. Despite a shortage of ammunition, the brigade put up a fierce defense. The German and Italian forces, however, soon encircled the brigade and, on June 1, overran and destroyed the 150th Brigade. By mid June, the rest of the 50th Division and 1st South African Division were in danger of being cut off and received orders to withdraw to the east. The coast road could only accommodate one division, however. While the South Africans took the road, the 50th executed a daring breakout to the *west* through an Italian division, before sweeping south behind enemy lines and then turning east. By effectively avoiding decisive engagements, 96% of the division reached friendly lines to the east in Egypt.²⁸

The Allied forces eventually held near El Alamein at the beginning of July. Having sustained considerable losses in men and equipment, the 8th Army withdrew the 50th Division from the line and ordered it to construct defenses for Rommel's anticipated drive on Cairo. From July thru October, the division conducted unit level training and re-fitted, receiving an influx of replacement soldiers from Great Britain.

On October 23, the 8th Army, now under the command of Lieutenant-General

Bernard L. Montgomery, launched a counter attack to break out from the Alamein line and regain the initiative. The 50th Division played a minor role during the first part of this fight. On November 1, however, 8th Army commenced Operation Supercharge. The 151st Brigade, paired with the 51st (Highland) Division's 152nd Brigade and Maori troops from the New Zealand Division, fought through heavy minefields and emplaced tanks to open a corridor for the 9th Armored Brigade to pass through. By the early morning of November 2, the 151st Brigade, having sustained over 400 casualties, reached its objective, allowing the 9th Armored Brigade to pass through and exploit the breach. Rommel, disobeying orders from the Führer, withdrew his forces and began a general retreat to the west.

As the 8th Army forced the Afrika Korps across the western desert, the 50th Division was again pulled from the line. As a result of having suffered so many casualties in the past six months, British commanders discussed disbanding the division and spreading its soldiers among the remaining divisions to alleviate the manpower shortage in the 8th Army. 8th Army leaders decided, ultimately, to re-fit the 50th Division; it spent the next three months near Benghazi, Libya, resting and re-equipping.

In March, 1943, the 8th Army ordered the 50th back to the front for the assault on the Mareth Line. Built by the French to defend Tunisia from the Italians in Libya, the Mareth Line was a series of strong points located on the edge of a deep and wide wadi. Bordered by the Mediterranean to the north and the Matmata Hills to the south, the line presented a significant obstacle to the 8th Army. Fresh from their rest and re-fit, 50th Division attacked directly into the line, attempting to form a bridgehead while fixing the German defenders in place. Meanwhile, several 8th Army divisions moved south,

flanking the Matmata Hills. Upon learning of the flanking movement and fearing envelopment, the Mareth Line defenders disengaged from the bloody battle with the 50th and withdrew. The 50th participated in a series of smaller battles until April 8, when it was withdrawn once again for rest and re-fit. With further operations in the Mediterranean looming, the division received the green 168th Brigade. Filling the void left by the 150th Brigade, the addition of the 168th brought the division back to full strength.

With the war in North Africa coming to a close, Allied planners looked to the next campaign. On April 18, 50th Division learned it would be part of Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. The division once again moved east towards Egypt, where it underwent extensive amphibious training in the Suez Canal Zone and mountain warfare training in Syria. Scheduled to land on D-Day, the 69th and 151st Brigades embarked troop ships at Suez on June 30 and July 1.

July 10, 1943, was D-Day for Sicily. Following an unopposed landing, both the 151st and 69th Brigades quickly achieved their initial objectives, meeting little resistance inland. Moving north towards Messina, the only significant opposition the division faced was at the Primosole Bridge. The Germans believed that by holding this key feature, they would be able to stop the British advance. The 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, though, captured the bridge on July 15 and defended it from intense counterattacks by German paratroopers. On the night of July 16, the remainder of the 151st Brigade, the 6th and 9th Battalions, The Durham Light Infantry, joined the defense of the Primosole bridgehead, thus sealing the defeat of the German attackers the next day. The remainder of the campaign was marked by small harassing actions as the Germans

fell back under the combined pressure of the Anglo-American attack. By mid August, Sicily was firmly in Allied control. Interestingly, over 2,000 men of the 50th became casualties not due to enemy fire, but malaria.²⁹

Experience Gained?

Despite the Allied victory, success in the Mediterranean fostered improper tactical thinking within the 8th Army that would ultimately prove costly in Normandy. Following its operations in Sicily, the 50th Division believed it did not require any special training for fighting in the close country of Normandy, even though the division had failed to maneuver behind and defeat the opposing German rear guards during the drive to Messina.³⁰ The 7th Armored Division's defeat of Italian forces at Beda Fomm, Libya, in 1941 reinforced the idea within that division that armored forces could win battles through maneuver alone without supporting infantry. The Afrika Korps, well aware of the British reluctance to integrate combined arms, noted in a particularly telling 1942 report that:

there was no close cooperation between infantry and armored formations. The tanks followed up very slowly and were not nearly quick enough in exploiting successes gained by lorried infantry.³¹

While the British continued to struggle with infantry-armor cooperation, infantry-artillery cooperation improved significantly after Arras. The success at Alamein of the 151st Brigade showed that infantry, without armor support, could take objectives provided the attack was at night, there was overwhelming artillery support, and commanders were willing to sustain tremendous casualties. In theory, this reliance on overwhelming firepower reduced losses and maintained the morale of the attacker, but in reality the slow pace of a rolling artillery barrage was not congruent with maneuver warfare.

Furthermore, British infantry came to expect a massive barrage preceding any advance.³²

British defeats in France, Greece, and North Africa, however, taught the army that if it was to succeed, then it must avoid operational maneuver in favor of set piece attrition battles based on superior quantities of materiel.³³ This change in operational technique was apparent to Rommel following the Battle of Alamein. The overall volume and combination of armor, artillery, infantry, and engineers used to breach the Alamein defenses at night impressed Rommel, who observed that:

(i)n the training of their armored and infantry formations the British command had made excellent use of the experience they had gained in previous actions with the Axis forces—although, of course the new methods they used were only made possible by their vast stocks of ammunition, material, and new equipment.³⁴

By the fall of 1943, preparations were well underway in the United Kingdom for Operation Overlord, but the British invasion force training in the U.K. lacked combat experience. While the 8th Army gained valuable experience fighting in the Mediterranean, it is unclear if the division commanders training at home even read the 8th Army's lessons learned dispatches or integrated those lessons into their unit's training.³⁵ While it would have been ideal to rotate troops into and out of the Mediterranean to expand British combat experience throughout the force, an acute lack of shipping prevented this option.³⁶

Though the 50th Division had certainly gained combat experience in the Mediterranean, its battlefield knowledge did not guarantee success in Normandy. Although the division had been in combat since May 10, 1940, not all of the men had been in combat that long. Substantial losses of both individual soldiers and units (such as the 150th Brigade) meant a good portion of the division did not have significant combat experience. Furthermore, the enemy in Normandy presented new challenges, from the

fixed positions on the beach to the mobile Panzer reserves in the countryside. The dense bocage terrain would be unlike anything the division experienced in the sweeping deserts of North Africa.³⁷

Although Montgomery would not be named 21st Army Group Commander for another three months, he wrote a force shaping proposal to Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, in September, 1943. Concerned with a lack of combat experience within the Overlord invasion force, Montgomery proposed sending the XXX Corps, the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, and the 51st (Highland) Division home from the Mediterranean to take part in the invasion.

It seems to me that if you get home to the UK the Corps HQ, the Corps Artillery, and the two Divisions of the Corps, *and you keep the whole party together in England as a Corps* [emphasis original], then you will have a Corps which has taken part in every type of fighting, which is a superb team, and which would be a model for the whole Army in England to study...To have such an experienced fighting Corps would be worth untold gold when it comes to a cross-Channel venture.³⁸

Brooke apparently agreed with Montgomery. The XXX Corps, the 50th and the 51st Divisions, and the 7th Armored Division received orders to return to the U.K. to prepare for the invasion of France. In mid October, the 50th Division, having served in the Mediterranean for two and a half years, embarked transport ships for the long journey to the England.

¹B.S. Barnes, *The Sign of the Double 'T'* (Kingston Upon Hull: Sentinel Press, 1999), 53.

²Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 141.

³Jonathan M. House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), 47-48.

⁴Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 90-92.

⁵House, 47-48.

⁶Kier, 89-90.

⁷Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, *The British Armed Forces, 1918-39* in Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. II, *The Interwar Period* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 122-123.

⁸Kier, 101.

⁹House, 48.

¹⁰Kier, 90.

¹¹David French, *Raising Churchill's Army-The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85.

¹²Ibid., 89.

¹³Ibid., 39, 41, 87, 89.

¹⁴Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2000), 147.

¹⁵Ibid., 147-151. For a detailed analysis of the Infantry—Armor coordination issue see Chapter 8 in its entirety.

¹⁶French, 210-211.

¹⁷Ibid., 170, 281.

¹⁸The Territorial Army was similar to the United States Army's National Guard. Units were regionally based and consisted mainly of part-time soldiers.

¹⁹French, 106.

²⁰E.W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950), 9-10.

²¹Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk-Fight to the Last Man* (London: Viking, 2006), 147-155.

²²David Rissik, *The D.L.I. at War* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 1952) 30-31.

²³Clay, 26.

²⁴French, 107.

²⁵Rissik, 25.

²⁶Clay, 19.

²⁷The 23rd (Northumbrian) Division was a “second line” Territorial Division. Formed from a cadre of soldiers from the 50th, the 23rd deployed to France to construct defenses before finishing its training in the United Kingdom. It was still in France on May 10, 1940, and fought in the Dunkirk perimeter.

²⁸Majors A.H.R. Baker and B. Rust, *A Short History of the 50th Northumbrian Division* (Berwick-Upon-Tweed: The Tweeddale Press LTD., 1966), 38-39.

²⁹Ibid., 47.

³⁰French, 272.

³¹Ibid., 6.

³²Ibid., 215, 265, 272, 285.

³³Ibid., 246.

³⁴Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*. Edited by B.H. Liddell Hart. Translated by Paul Findlay. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), 330-331.

³⁵Bond and Murray, 128.

³⁶Place, 173. With success finally achieved at Alamein, the British army hesitated to replace successful combat units with green replacements. Furthermore, the regimental system within the army impeded an easy transfer of individual men. Units, especially the Territorials, had trained and fought together for years. Fearing a morale crisis, the army decided against individual replacements.

³⁷The bocage of Normandy is characterized by woods, orchards, and small fields bordered by tall, steeply banked hedgerows and winding, sunken lanes. With limited visibility and difficult terrain, the defender clearly has the advantage in the bocage.

³⁸David French, “Invading Europe: The British Army and its Preparations for the Normandy Campaign, 1942-1944.” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 2 (June, 2003): 277.

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING TO JUMP OUT OF A BOAT

The training for the actual landing merely consisted of learning to jump out of a boat and endless, tedious hours of waterproofing our vehicles.¹

Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hastings
Commanding Officer
6th Battalion, The Green Howards

Introduction

This chapter discusses the 50th Division's short six months of preparation for Operation Overlord. It will focus especially on the key factors that affected the division's performance in Normandy, including large scale personnel changes, a change in organizational structure, amphibious assault and combined arms training, and the division's morale. The 50th Division, on the eve of D-Day, was a significantly different formation than the one that served in the Mediterranean; fighting an unfamiliar enemy in conditions and terrain that were drastically different than what it had experienced just months earlier.

Changes in Personnel

The 50th Division arrived in Liverpool in early November, 1943. Although it spent the previous two and half years fighting in North Africa and Sicily, the only sign of a homecoming celebration for the division was the patriotic music played over the port's public address system. Following an orderly disembarkation to the curious looks of the American military police guarding the pier, the soldiers of the 50th soon departed for leave, the length of which being determined by their time overseas. Following the brief

rest, the men realized the challenge of the invasion to come. According to Private George Worthington of the 6th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry:

We weren't very happy about being used as the attacking troops on D-Day, but there was nothing we could do about it. Everybody was happy about coming home; when we found out what we were coming home for it took a bit of the shine off it. The only satisfaction we got was that Montgomery had asked for our division because he wanted experienced troops and at least we got some leave out of it.²

General Bernard L. Montgomery knew that for the coming invasion to succeed the 21st Army Group needed combat experienced troops. In the fall of 1943, the 50th Division was the most combat experienced division in the British army.³ As early as 1942, Montgomery identified that:

We suffer from a grave disadvantage in this country in that we lack day-to-day experience of modern battle fighting, and those of us who have commanded units and formations in battle in this war are few in number. Very few of our soldiers have any idea of the conditions of the modern battle. Our enemies know this very well and will hope to profit from it.⁴

The army that had been training in the United Kingdom since Dunkirk was well versed in the theory of warfare, but had no experience in its practice. Accordingly, those officers and soldiers did not know the "tricks of the battlefield."⁵ Immediately after taking command of the 21st Army Group, Montgomery took steps to rectify that problem in the officer corps by replacing inexperienced commanders, staff officers, and others deemed not competent with officers who had proved themselves in the Mediterranean. In the veteran divisions, Montgomery retained the commanders of the 51st (Highland) and the 7th Armored Divisions, while Major-General Sidney Chevalier Kirkman, who led the 50th Division through the final phases of North Africa and in Sicily, departed for Italy to assume command of the XIII Corps.⁶ Major-General Douglas Alexander Henry Graham succeeded Kirkman in command of the 50th on January 19, 1944. Graham commanded

the 27th Infantry Brigade in May, 1940. Described as a “very experienced fighting Brigadier in 51 Div,” Montgomery personally recommended to the Imperial General Staff in May, 1943, that Graham be given command of the 56th Division in Tunisia.⁷ Taking charge of the 56th in the final days of fighting for Tunis, Graham then led the division in combat at Salerno in September and the capture of Naples in late September and early October. Montgomery’s personnel changes were not limited to senior leaders, however.⁸

Select officers and soldiers from the veteran divisions were exchanged with men from the green divisions, with the idea that the infusion of combat knowledge would assist the inexperienced units when they first entered combat in Normandy. Conversely, Lieutenant-Colonel P.H. Richardson, commander of the 7th Battalion, The Green Howards, removed several veterans from leadership positions in his battalion, fearful that these “battle weary” men might crack under continued strain.⁹ Furthermore, the 50th continued to lose men to sickness, as malaria was widespread among the division’s veterans of the Sicily campaign.¹⁰

While Montgomery believed that the personnel shifts were widely understood and generally accepted by the army, Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hastings, commander of the 6th Battalion, The Green Howards, harshly referred to his new replacement troops as the “discards of regiments that had been training for years in England.”¹¹ Hastings was further critical of the replacement of his immediate senior, the commander of the 69th Brigade. Brigadier Edward Cunliffe Cooke-Collis, having led the brigade since Gazala, received orders to command a brigade in the 49th (West Riding) Division, then earmarked as an assault division. Personally appointed by Montgomery, Brigadier Fergus Y. Carson

Knox replaced Cooke-Collis. Although Knox had led a dramatic bayonet charge at Dunkirk, he spent the following years training in the U.K. and faced the challenge of leading three battalion commanders coming straight out of battle. Inevitably, the Brigadier and his battalion commanders had numerous disagreements as to how to best prepare for the invasion.¹²

Changes in Organizational Composition

Following operations in the Mediterranean, the 231st Infantry Brigade replaced the 168th Brigade, which remained in Italy and joined the 56th (London) Division (see figure 4 and Appendix C). For the veteran 231st, Normandy would be the brigade's third assault landing in less than one year, as it participated in both the Sicily and Italian peninsula landings in 1943. While the 50th now had three combat experienced brigades, the division staff did not believe that this was adequate to achieve its D-Day objectives. Subsequently, the division asked for, and received, an additional infantry brigade—the recently formed 56th Brigade.¹³

Although the Allies conducted night amphibious assaults in the Mediterranean, the complexity of Overlord drove planners to select a dawn assault.¹⁴ Not expecting to surprise the German defenders, the invasion force planned on speed and an overwhelming bombardment to achieve success. To assist in that bombardment, the 21st Army Group allocated to the 50th two additional field artillery regiments, giving the division a total of five artillery regiments. Three of the regiments were self propelled and equipped with the 25-pound Sexton gun, giving the 50th mobile fire support for its advance inland.¹⁵

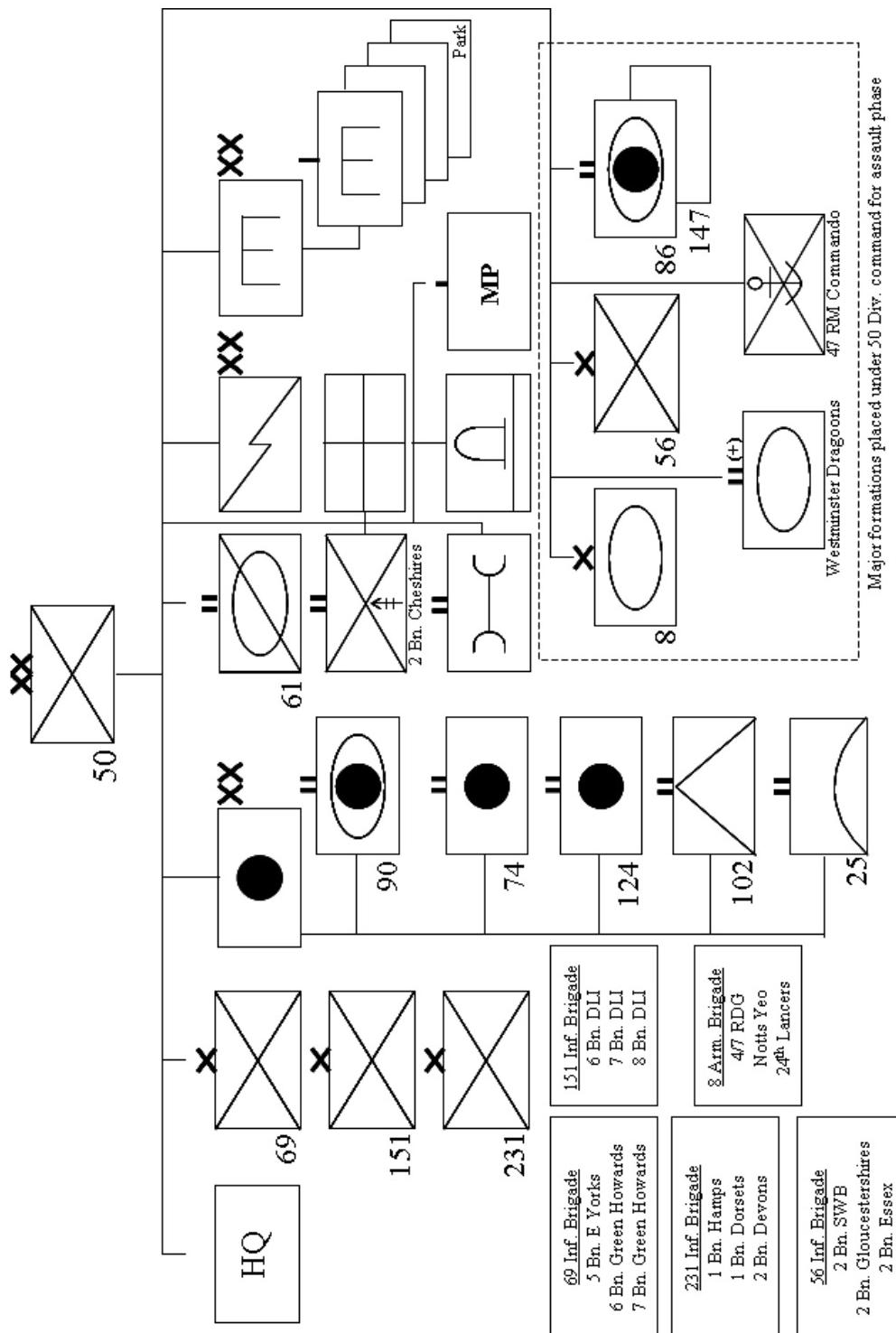


Figure 4. Organization of the 50th Division on June 6, 1944.

Amphibious Assaults-Lessons Learned, 1942-1943

Immediately following the Dunkirk evacuation, the British army began the formal process of collecting lessons learned in combat. This continued throughout the campaign in North Africa, leading to the establishment of the Directorate of Tactical Investigations, which published lengthy lessons learned reports starting in February, 1943.¹⁶ While the Allies had conducted amphibious assaults in both northwest Europe (Dieppe, France) and in the Mediterranean Theater (Northwest Africa, Sicily, and the Italian peninsula), none of these operations approached the scale of the Overlord plan or faced the extensive beach defenses presented in Normandy.¹⁷ The Allied planners, nevertheless, sought whatever lessons could be learned from these different, smaller scale operations and attempted to apply them to Overlord.

The failed 1942 Dieppe raid confirmed that the critical phase of an amphibious landing is not getting the troops to the beach, but getting them off the beach and moving inland. Landing infantry alone without sufficient supporting arms proved catastrophic.¹⁸ The ideal plan would land infantry in the third or fourth wave, after the armor was ashore and established. The British realized the need for specialized armor which could negotiate both natural and man-made obstacles, such as minefields, and clear a path for conventional armor and infantry to get off of the beach. Subsequently in April, 1943, the 79th Armored Division reorganized to develop specialized armor and associated tactics. This specialized armor proved invaluable to the 50th on D-Day, clearing minefields, breaching an anti-tank ditch, and opening the exit road from Gold Beach. While the Allies drew what lessons they could from the Mediterranean (including the unopposed Sicily landing), they even studied landings in the Pacific, such as Tarawa.¹⁹

Training for D-Day

When the 50th's invasion role changed, so did the focus of its training. While the division had received extensive training in Egypt prior to the landing in Sicily, less than half of the men that made the Sicilian landing remained in the division. Furthermore, the landing tasks for the 69th and 231st Brigades, the assault brigades, were significantly different than what they had faced in Sicily and the Italian peninsula, respectively. Before the division could begin its training, though, it had to re-equip. Having left all of its vehicles, stores, and weapons (other than small arms) in Italy, the 50th spent most of January, 1944, drawing new equipment. When Montgomery designated the 50th as an assault formation in mid-February, the division began its second re-equipping in as many months. The 50th traded its recently drawn conventional equipment for waterproofed equipment. This lengthy process cost the division valuable training time. With its new mission, the 50th shifted to an intensive assault training program in March that included combined arms and amphibious warfare training, and familiarization with the specialized tanks of the 79th Armored Division.²⁰

The training plan was ambitious and required the division to divide up to accomplish its training. Each brigade followed the same training plan. First was two weeks with the 79th Armored Division, followed by two weeks of amphibious warfare training in Scotland. The brigade then traveled to Weymouth for two weeks of training with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force before returning to East Anglia for unit level training. Meanwhile, the division headquarters and senior brigade planners were in London perfecting the Overlord plan.²¹

Due to a shortage of landing craft, Force "G," the amphibious task force that

would carry the 50th Division to Gold Beach, did not form until early March, 1944. Exercises Smash I-IV, held in April, were full scale rehearsals with supporting arms and gave the 50th a good idea of the challenges it would face during the amphibious assault. Exercise Fabius was the final rehearsal for the invasion. Held in early May, all assault divisions (British, Canadian, and American) landed with their support units.²² Fabius succeeded in orchestrating the combined movements of the massive Overlord invasion force and provided the 50th an opportunity to land as a division, as it would in Normandy. Fabius, like the exercises held in March and April, did not allow for the 50th to operate as a division fighting inland.

Value of Training

In early 1944, Montgomery found some commanding officers within his combat experienced divisions reluctant to send their men to training schools in the United Kingdom. These veterans argued that the schools were not providing realistic training in light of recent experiences in North Africa and Sicily. Furthermore, veteran commanders believed that the battle drills promulgated by the British army in the United Kingdom were worthless, as combat was not “by the book” and “schoolhouse solutions” constrained a leader’s initiative. These opinions may have come as a surprise to the British army, as it had strived for realism in training following its post-Dunkirk re-constitution. The realism of the Smash exercises, however, impressed the 50th Division.²³

The Smash exercises were live fire events with bombs, rockets, artillery, naval gunfire, and small arms. Veteran members of the Durham Light Infantry remarked that the training during the Smash exercises approached an intensity not seen since combat in

North Africa or Sicily.²⁴ The integration with the Royal Navy was of “utmost value” according to Major-General Graham.²⁵ The Smash exercises did have their drawbacks, though. While the British army could not control the weather, three of the four exercises were carried out in fair weather and calm seas. Only one landing was made in conditions similar to those encountered on D-Day. Furthermore, overcast spring skies limited participation by the Royal Air Force, depriving the 50th of valuable air to ground coordination training. With so many large scale amphibious assault exercises, a key secondary effect was that the 50th had few opportunities for unit level training.²⁶

The focus of the pre-invasion training, according to Green Howards veteran and historian Captain W.A.T. Synge, was “solely for getting ashore and tackling the immediate defenses.” Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings, commander of the 6th Battalion, The Green Howards, believed that having received so many new recruits with minimal experience, his battalion would have been better served with more unit level training instead of large scale combined operations and amphibious assault training. Lieutenant-Colonel Richardson, commander of the 7th Battalion, The Green Howards, felt that the lack of unit level training ultimately affected the division’s performance in the unique bocage terrain of Normandy, where good small unit leadership and tactics were essential.²⁷

Terrain also played a significant role in the 50th Division’s preparations for and performance in Normandy. Upon its return to the United Kingdom, the division was posted to East Anglia, an area Major-General Graham classified as “unsuitable” for combined arms training and in no way similar to the terrain of Normandy.²⁸ The 50th Division, however, was not the only formation training in non-similar terrain, as most of

the British army trained in conditions unlike those like Normandy. Only the 43rd Wessex Division found similar terrain in its Kent Training Area.²⁹ Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks, who would take command of XXX Corps in August, 1944, argued that the veteran divisions, having been in the African desert for the past few years, should have been sent to the “depths of the country” to train in terrain similar to that found in Normandy.³⁰ Unfortunately, this did not happen, forcing the men of the 50th to adapt to the distinctive bocage of Normandy as they encountered it, under enemy fire.

Morale

On February 15, 1944, Montgomery announced to a formation of the 151st Brigade that 50th Division would be an assault unit on D-Day. Understandably, this was not well received by the combat veterans of the Mediterranean. Private J. Forster of the 6th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, summed up the general feeling within the division:

Why does it have to be us, some have never struck a bat, we've been to France, the Middle East, and we've been to Sicily. They brought us all the way back for the landing, haven't we done our share? We didn't like that.³¹

Severely compounding morale issues was a widely circulated news article that estimated that an assault division in a cross channel attack would sustain 80-90% casualties. This issue received Supreme Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower's attention, who directed senior leaders to address their troops and tell them that the article was not accurate.³²

Montgomery visited every formation that he could in the United Kingdom. To boost morale, he explained what lay ahead in Europe, who the enemy was, and how to defeat him. Montgomery believed these visits to be a success, as he was confident in the

troops' capabilities and hoped that they had the same confidence in him.³³ Some soldiers of the 50th, still not pleased with their role in the invasion, booed Montgomery during his May visit to the division.³⁴

The 50th Division, despite the feeling that it was doing more than its share, accepted its role in the invasion. In fact, the division had little trouble during its pre-invasion leave. In the 6th Battalion, The Green Howards, the only significant issue related to morale prior to the invasion involved a new officer. Major Gordon, the newly appointed second-in-command of the battalion, committed suicide during leave. With his only experience being in India and having never been in battle, Gordon could not face the responsibility of taking command in combat, according to Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings.³⁵

In some instances, the rigorous training helped to improve morale. The men of the 2nd Battalion, The Devonshire Regiment, were pleased to see the lessons learned from their landings in Sicily and Italy implemented into the pre-Overlord training.³⁶ Seeing the significant developments in amphibious warfare tactics and equipment, such as the specialized armor of the 79th Division also bolstered soldiers' spirits. As D-Day approached, overall morale within the British army was high.³⁷ The veterans of the 50th, however, were not as motivated to once again enter combat.³⁸

The Enemy in Normandy

While the 50th Division had about half a year to prepare for the invasion, the German defenders in Normandy had been preparing their defenses since the fall of France in June, 1940 (see figure 5). The Germans depicted the Atlantic Wall, as the defenses came to be known, as an impenetrable barrier that stretched from Spain to Norway. German defenses were quite impressive in the most likely invasion locations.

The Germans had constructed massive concrete casemates armed with both large caliber guns and automatic weapons overlooking beaches sown with mines and obstacles. The German defenders built the heaviest fortifications in the Pas de Calais and on the Dutch coast, while Normandy, being further from Germany received somewhat less fortification.

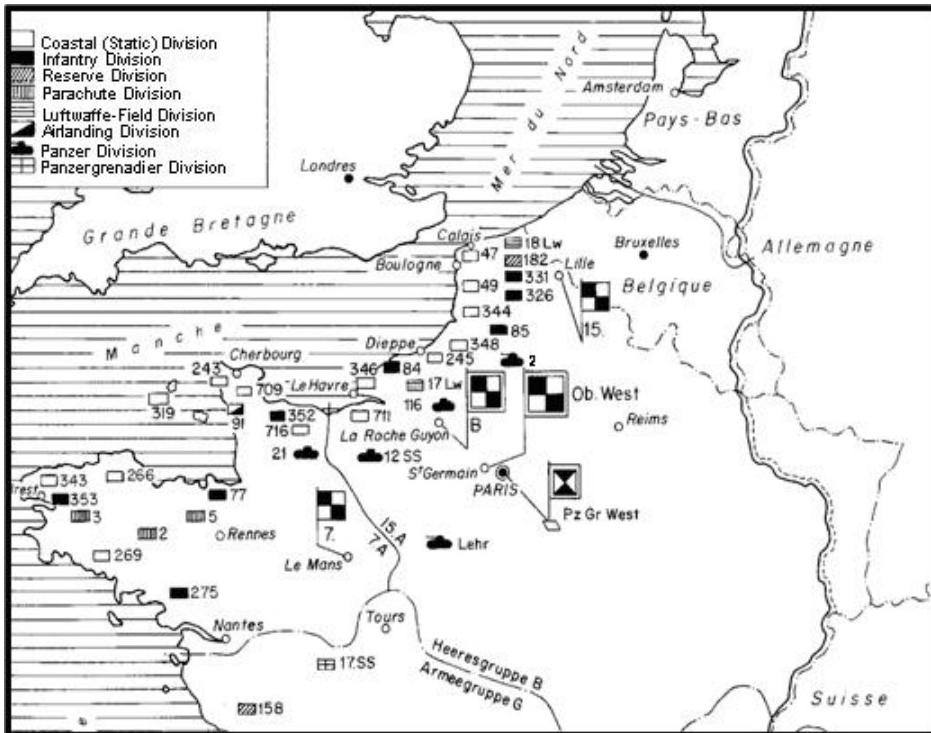


Figure 5. The German Defenses on June 6, 1944.

Source: Georges Bernage, Jean-Pierre Benamou, Bernard Crochet, François de Lannoy, Laurent Mari, and Ronald MacNair. *Album Memorial Overlord* (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1993), 89.

The Atlantic Wall, however, was not the barrier that German propaganda had proclaimed it to be. General Günther Blumentritt, Chief of Staff for the German Army Command in the West (*Oberbefehlshaber West* or OB West), described the Atlantic Wall as a “bluff,” as the fixed coastal fortifications provided only a thin line of defense.³⁹ These fortifications were manned with personnel that were not Germany’s top troops. Generally unsuited for service on the Eastern Front, the coastal divisions contained men

that were either too old, too young, previously wounded, or captured by the Germans in the east. Furthermore, the fortifications had limited ammunition and were susceptible to both bombing and shore bombardment. Once an invasion force pierced the Atlantic Wall, the “concrete monsters” on the coast could no longer affect the invasion force, as the invader would “be in free terrain” while moving inland, according to Blumentritt.⁴⁰

To prevent an invasion from piercing the coastal defenses, Field Marshal Erwin B. Rommel, now commanding German Army Group B, ordered sweeping upgrades to the defenses in his area of operations, which included Normandy. Rommel, the 50th Division’s familiar opponent from Arras and North Africa, believed that the best place to defeat an invasion was on the beach and sought control of the Panzer divisions in OB West. Rommel’s superior and commander of OB West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, wanted to maintain the Panzers in reserve until the location of the main assault was determined, at which point the Panzers would be committed to the fight. This disagreement was settled by Hitler, who allocated three Panzer divisions to Rommel (2nd, 116th, and 21st), while the remaining Panzer divisions in OB West (1st SS, 12th SS, and Panzer Lehr) would be stationed in northern France and fall under the control of the German Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or OKW). This essentially placed the 1st SS, 12th SS, and Panzer Lehr Divisions under Hitler’s direct control. Von Runstedt was left with no Panzer divisions under his command. Rommel, commanding a region that stretched from Brittany to Belgium, placed the 21st Panzer Division south of Normandy, the 116th Panzer Division between Dieppe and Paris, and the 2nd Panzer Division near Amiens, halfway between Paris and the likely invasion area near Calais. With so much coast line to defend, Rommel’s Panzers were stationed too far

from the coast to repel a landing on the same day it occurred.⁴¹ The Germans would have to rely on their two divisions guarding the coast in Normandy, the 716th and 352nd Infantry, to repel an invasion (see figure 6).

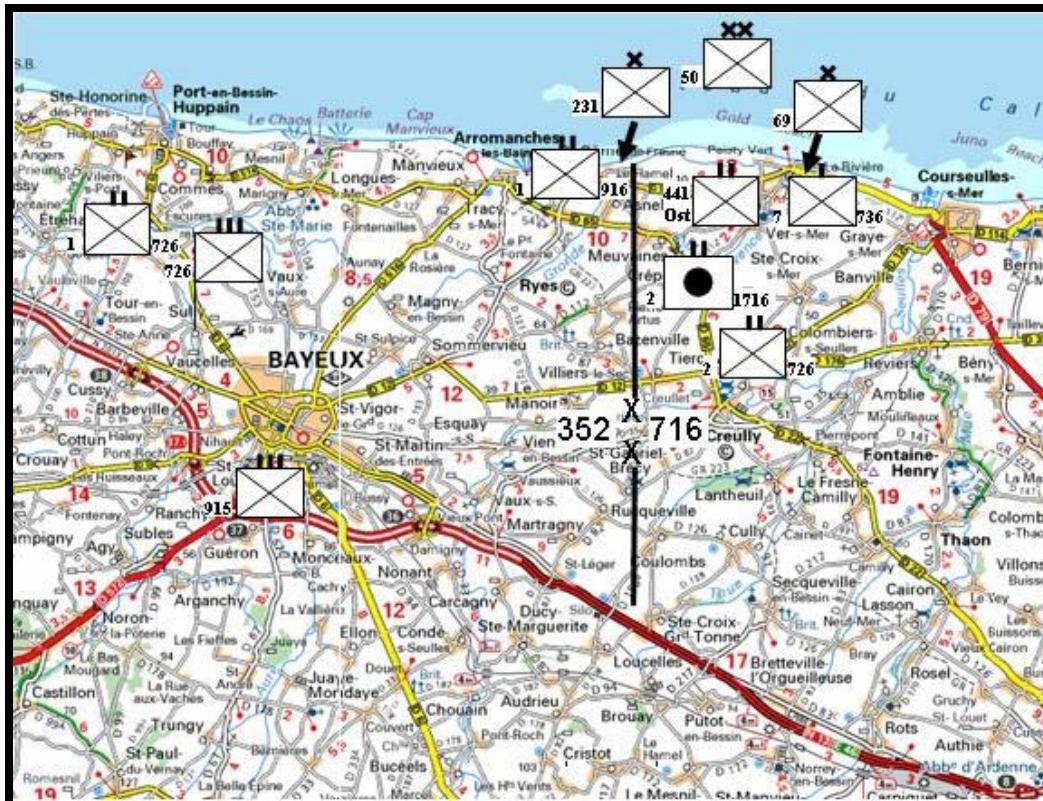


Figure 6. German Defenses, Gold Beach Sector.

Map Source: www.viamichelin.com

Formed in May, 1941, as an occupation division, the 716th arrived in Normandy in June, 1942, to cover the area from the Orne River to the Vire River. Composed mainly of elderly and territorial soldiers from the Rhineland and Ruhr, the division's initial strength was roughly 17,000. Troop requirements for the Eastern Front reduced the division's size to only 7,771 in May, 1944.⁴² To bolster the dwindling coastal defenses, the German army ordered the 352nd Infantry Division to move from its location south of St. Lo to a position closer to the coast and, on March 15, 1944, inserted the 352nd into the Atlantic Wall.⁴³ Unlike the "static" 716th, the 352nd was a much more capable "field"

division manned with higher quality soldiers.

The German LXXXIV Corps established the divisional boundary between the 716th and the 352nd just east of Le Hamel—the center of Jig Sector on Gold Beach where the 50th Division's 231st Brigade planned to land. The 352nd took control of the 716th's 726th Infantry Regiment which manned the defenses from Le Hamel west to the Vire River. The 726th's 2nd Battalion, located south of the King Sector of Gold Beach, remained under the control of the 716th Division. Furthermore, the LXXXIV Corps created a robust reserve composed of the 915th Infantry Regiment, the 352nd Fusilier Battalion, the 1352nd Assault Gun Battalion, and the 352nd Anti-Tank Battalion.⁴⁴ With the reserve located in the vicinity of Bayeux, it could rapidly counter-attack any invader in the center of the Normandy coast. Even with so many additional forces in the vicinity of the beach, Allied intelligence did not detect the 352nd Division's movement forward until May 14. With the invasion less than a month away, there was no time to change the massive Overlord plan.⁴⁵

In planning for the amphibious assault on Gold Beach, the 50th Division expected to find eight strong points armed with guns from varying from 50mm to 122mm either on the beach or in the immediate vicinity. 50th Division intelligence planners anticipated one platoon of soldiers defending each strongpoint with one or two machine gun platoons on the Meuvaines Ridge immediately behind Gold Beach. In reality, the Germans had positioned a much larger force near the beach.⁴⁶ A mix of the 1st Battalion, 726th Infantry Regiment, and the 1st Battalion, 916th Infantry Regiment manned the defenses at Le Hamel. To the east, the 441st Ost Battalion defended an area from Asnelles to la Riviere. Comprised of 1,000 Soviet “volunteers” pressed into service and led by 270 German

commissioned and non-commissioned officers, von Rundstedt called the Ost troops a “menace and nuisance to operations.”⁴⁷ With the 50th only expecting to find eight to ten platoons defending the beaches, a thousand defenders on Gold Beach would certainly be more than a nuisance.

Rommel continued to argue his operational vision throughout the spring of 1944. In his view, the Eastern Front veterans were largely underestimating the capabilities of an Anglo-American invasion force. General Geyr von Schweppenburg, a former Eastern Front corps commander now commanding Panzer Group West in France, even advocated allowing the invasion force to land and establish itself in France before unleashing the Panzers to annihilate the invaders. Having the experience of fighting the Allies in North Africa for two years, however, Rommel appreciated his enemy’s capabilities. On May 17, Rommel commented to Lieutenant General Fritz Bayerlein, commander of the Panzer Lehr Division and fellow North Africa veteran, that:

Our friends from the East cannot imagine what they’re in for here...we are facing an enemy who applies all his native intelligence to the use of his many technical resources, who spares no expenditure of material and whose every operation goes its course as though it had been the subject of repeated rehearsals...he must have sufficient intelligence to enable him to get the most out of his fighting machine. And that’s something these people can do, we found that out in Africa.⁴⁸

Invasion Training—An Assessment

Others were not impressed by the state of the British army on the eve of D-Day. Writing to military theorist and historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart in 1958, an unnamed wartime division commander remarked:

Training: I have already told you how shocked I was at the meager results of two years of training in the United Kingdom when I met 44 Div, 51 Div, 56 Div (not to mention 50 Div which learned nothing, ever, even after years in the desert).⁴⁹

Ultimately, this General Officer's comment about the 50th failing to learn in the desert is irrelevant with regards to their preparations for Normandy. As this chapter has shown, the 50th Division on D-Day was drastically different than the one that arrived in Liverpool in November, 1943. Large scale changes in personnel, from the senior leaders all the way down to junior soldiers, had transformed the division. Additional units, both infantry and artillery, changed the way the division operated. The D-Day mission assigned—the assault element for XXX Corps—changed how the division trained and how it would fight. While the division benefited from having veterans who had learned, and could pass on, the “tricks of the battlefield,” the 50th was entering a fight unlike any it, or anyone else in the British 2nd Army, had seen before.

¹Robin Hastings, *An Undergraduate's War* (London: Bellhouse Publishing, 1997), 216.

²B.S. Barnes, *The Sign of the Double 'T'* (Kingston Upon Hull: Sentinel Press, 1999), 62.

³The 51st (Highland) Division also fought in France in 1940, but lost two of its three brigades. Subsequently, the division was reconstituted on August 7, 1940, by redesignating the 9th (Highland) Division as the 51st. The Highland Division did not enter combat in North Africa until October, 1942 at El Alamein. The 7th Armored Division first fought at Sidi Barrani in North Africa in December, 1940. [H.F. Joslen, *Orders of Battle. 2 Vols., United Kingdom and Colonial Formations and Units in the Second World War 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1960).]

⁴David French, “Invading Europe: The British Army and its Preparations for the Normandy Campaign, 1942-1944.” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 2 (June, 2003): 277.

⁵Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 195.

⁶Major-Generals D.C. Bullen-Smith and G.W.J. Erskine, commanded 51st Highland and 7th Armored Divisions, respectively.

⁷David French, "Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany, 1939-1945." *The English Historical Review*

111, no. 444 (November, 1996): 1182-1201. The 1st London Division was re-designated the 56th London Division on November 18, 1940.

⁸French, "Invading Europe," 287.

⁹W.A.T. Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards, 1939-1945* (Richmond: The Green Howards, 1952), 285. Many of these men were posted to training centers and schools where their combat experience proved invaluable.

¹⁰Malaria also affected 51st (Highland) Division. Divisional doctors in both the 50th and 51st placed many soldiers on a mepacrine regimen that lasted throughout the Normandy campaign. See David French, "Tommy Is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1996): 167.

¹¹Montgomery, 195; and Hastings, 212.

¹²Hastings, 212.

¹³WO 223/7: Staff College Camberley, 1947 Course Notes on D-Day Landings and Ensuing Campaigns (50 Div: Notes by Maj.-Gen. Graham, 1943 – 1944). Formed February 20, 1944, by combining three infantry battalions from two different divisions with a new brigade headquarters, 56 Brigade had no combined arms training, let alone overseas experience.

¹⁴Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1951), 188.

¹⁵WO 223/7: Testing had revealed that self propelled artillery, firing from Landing Craft, Tank (LCT), could provide accurate bombardment of shore positions during the run in to the beach. Furthermore, by being self propelled, the artillery could quickly move off the beach to support the advancing infantry.

¹⁶David French, *Raising Churchill's Army-The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 280.

¹⁷Adrian R. Lewis, *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 210.

¹⁸Canadian Military Headquarters Historical Officer, "Report No. 128: The lessons of Dieppe and their influence on Operation Overlord." [Directorate of History and Heritage](#). Available from <http://www.dnd.ca/dhh/downloads/cmhq/cmhq128.pdf>. Internet; accessed 21 June 2007.

¹⁹Canadian Military Headquarters Historical Officer, "Report No. 128."; Robin Neillands, *The Dieppe Raid: The Story of the Disastrous 1942 Expedition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 267-269; and Harrison, 193.

²⁰WO 223/7.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³French, "Invading Europe," 281; and *Raising Churchill's Army*, 203.

²⁴P.J. Lewis and I.R. English. *Into Battle with the Durhams: 8 D.L.I. in World War II* (London: The London Stamp Exchange, Ltd., 1990), 236.

²⁵WO 223/7.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Synge, 283-284; and Hastings, 216.

²⁸WO 223/7.

²⁹French, "Invading Europe," 282.

³⁰Brian Horrocks, *Corps Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 28.

³¹Barnes, 62.

³²Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 237.

³³Montgomery, 195.

³⁴David French, "Tommy Is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1996): 159.

³⁵Hastings, 116-117.

³⁶Jeremy Taylor, *The Devons: A History of the Devonshire Regiment, 1685-1945* (Bristol: The White Swan Press, 1951), 236;

³⁷Lewis and English, 236; and Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation and 'Colossal Cracks': 21st Army Group's Operational Technique in North West Europe, 1944-1945." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4

(December, 1996): 137.

³⁸Barnes, 66. In his “Reports from Normandy,” Brigadier James Hargest states that, during the pre-invasion training, AWOLs in the 50th “became very prevalent in the New Forest Area amounting to over 1,000 and there was considerable unrest” (CAB 106/1060). No other work consulted for this study independently confirms Hargest’s numbers, “considerable unrest,” or even large scale AWOLs prior to the invasion.

³⁹Günther Blumentritt, “Report of the Chief of Staff” in *The German Army at D-Day*, ed. David C. Isby (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2004), 27.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), 118-120.

⁴²Georges Bernage, *Gold, Juno, Sword* (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 2003), 4, 62.

⁴³Ibid., 61; and Tim Saunders, *Gold Beach-Jig* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002), 32.

⁴⁴Saunders, 36-37

⁴⁵Ibid., 34.

⁴⁶Ibid., 36, 46-47.

⁴⁷Ibid., 37.

⁴⁸Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers* (Edited by B.H. Liddell Hart, Translated by Paul Findlay, New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), 467-468.

⁴⁹Williamson Murray, “British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War” in *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. 3, ed. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 126.

CHAPTER 4

NORMANDY

Monty's principle of including experienced formations and units in the invasion force was unsound; much better results would have been achieved if fresh formations, available in England, had been used in their place...I noticed on several occasions the differences in dash between formations which had been fighting a long time and those who were fresh.¹

Major-General G.P.B. "Pip" Roberts
General Officer Commanding
11th Armored Division

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the 50th Division's performance while fighting in Normandy from June to August, 1944, beginning with an analysis of the 50th's actions on D-Day. General Bernard L. Montgomery's operational technique and its impact on the 50th will be discussed, followed by an examination of the division's June and July battles, to include combined arms effectiveness and morale-related issues. Finally, the performance of the 50th will be compared with that of its fellow North Africa veterans the 7th Armored and the 51st (Highland) Divisions. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that General Montgomery made a sound military decision to include the 50th Division in the invasion plan and, unlike the other veteran divisions, the 50th fought effectively on the front lines throughout the Normandy campaign.

D-Day

The 21st Army Group assigned Lieutenant-General Miles C. Dempsey's British 2nd Army the Normandy coast stretching from Bayeux to Caen for Operation Overlord (see figure 7). The British 2nd Army's I Corps would land the 3rd Infantry Division near

Caen on a beach code-named “Sword” and would land the 3rd Canadian Division on “Juno,” immediately to the west.

Further to the west the British XXX Corps, under Lieutenant-General Gerard C. Bucknall, would land on “Gold” with the 50th Division in the lead (see figure 8).

Lieutenant-General Bucknall’s intent for XXX Corps in Overlord was:

To secure a beach-head in the area from inclusive Port en Bessin...to inclusive La Riviere, known as Gold. From here the corps would operate southwards, in accordance with the Second Army plan, to secure the Mont Pincon massif and the country running down to the R. Noireau. The advance would be by bounds from firm base to firm base, the maximum amount of offensive action being carried out in front of those firm bases.²

XXX Corps planners anticipated that the final phase of this operation, the drive to the River Noireau, would begin between D+12 and D+17. Major-General D.A.H. Graham’s D-Day intent for the the 50th Division, the only XXX Corps division scheduled to land in its entirety on D-Day, was:

To penetrate the beach def(ense)s between Le Hamel...and La Riviere...and to secure by last light a line which will incl(ude) the high ground Pt 63...Bayeux...St Louphors...Monunirel...the high ground about Blary...Pt 81...and the feature St Leger...astride r(oa)d Bayeux-Caen.³

Furthermore, Graham intended to “exploit with a mobile force, including armour, to Villers Bocage...an important communications center. This move should start in the late afternoon of D-Day.”⁴

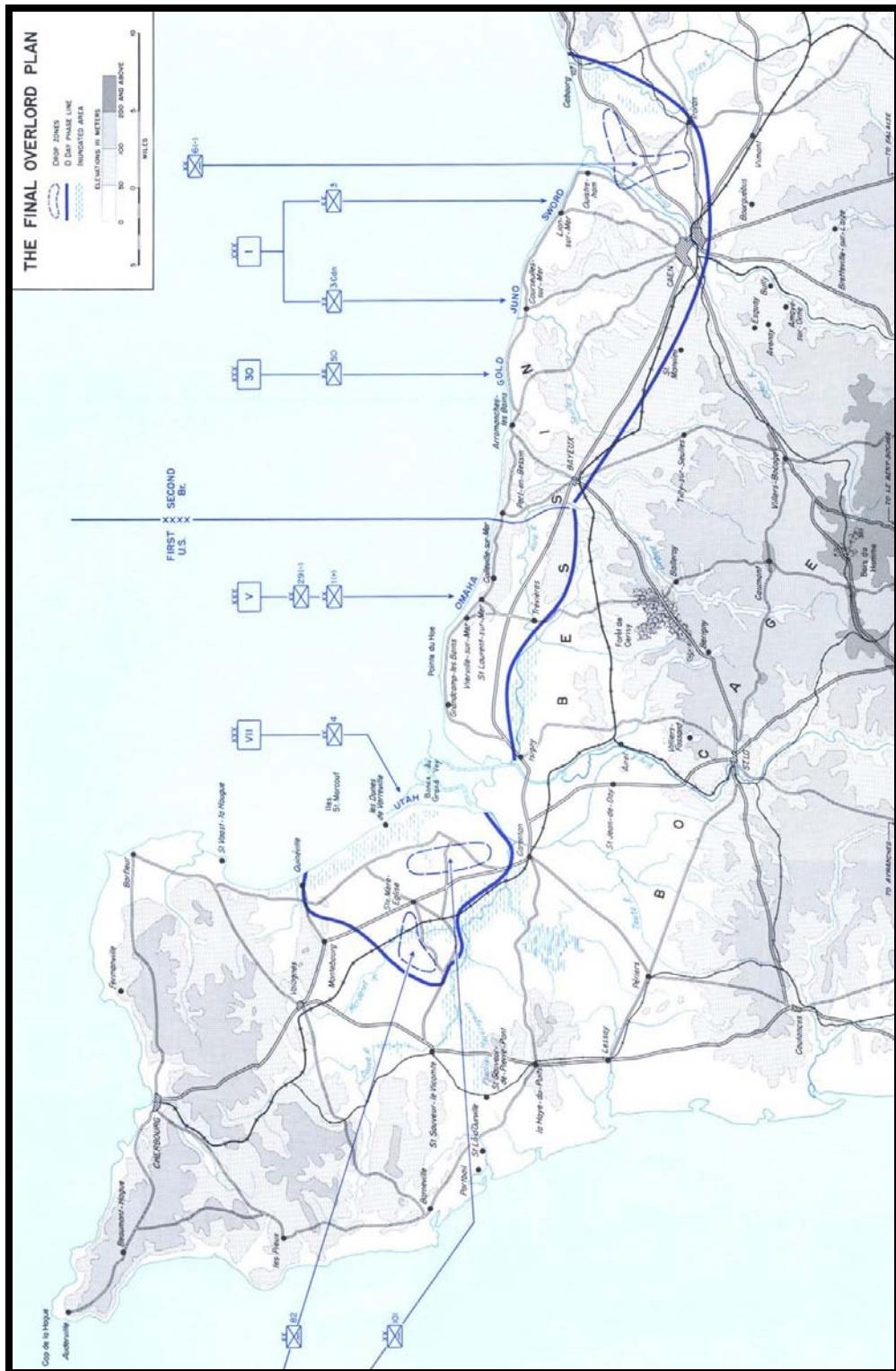


Figure 7. The Final Overlord Plan.

Source: Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1951).

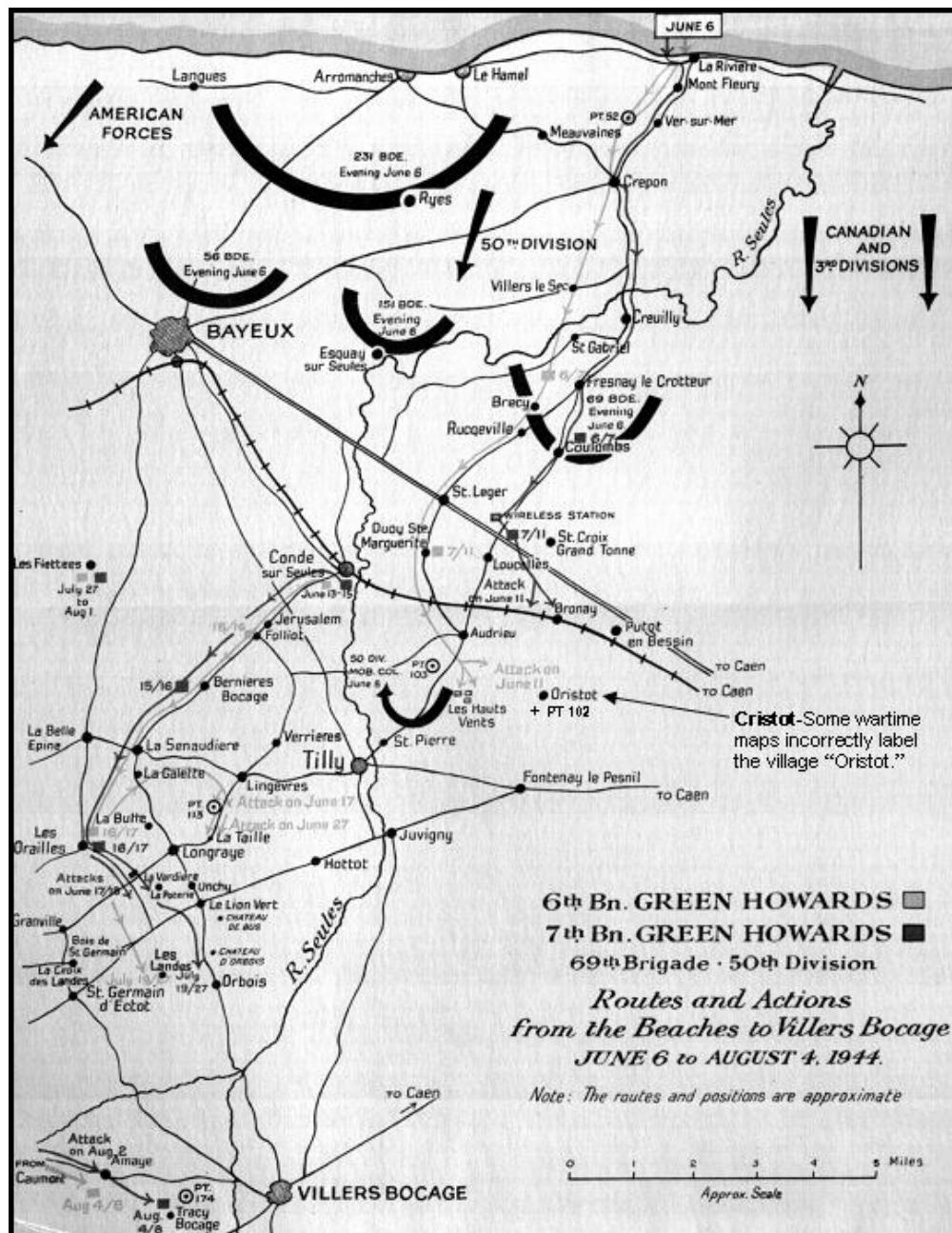


Figure 8. Gold Beach Sector of Normandy.

Source: W.A.T. Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards, 1939-1945* (Richmond: The Green Howards, 1952). Map faces p. 286.

The 50th Division's overall assault plan for D-Day was to land two brigade groups, each supported by a regiment of tanks. The 69th Brigade would make its second assault landing of the war on the division's left (eastern) flank, near La Riviere. The

231st Brigade's third assault landing of the war would be on the division's right (western) flank, near Le Hamel. The 50th would then land its reserve brigades (151st and 56th) two hours after the initial landings. Once assembled, the reserve brigades would continue the expansion of the beachhead begun by the assault brigades.⁵

In developing their plan for the defense of Normandy, the Germans assumed that if the coastal strong points could be protected from air and sea bombardment, invading infantry alone would be unable to neutralize the beach obstacles and fortifications.⁶ While the Allies certainly had an ambitious bombardment plan, the 50th would land two squadrons of duplex-drive tanks a few minutes before the infantry brigade came ashore in order to help clear the beach—a lesson learned from Dieppe.⁷ A third squadron of conventionally driven tanks would land with each brigade's reserve battalion.⁸ A second planning assumption made by the Germans was that any assault landing would be made at or near high tide, thus exposing the attacking infantry to the minimum amount of unprotected beach. Accordingly, the Germans sited their weapons on the area between the high tide line and the beach dunes or sea wall, as appropriate. To counter this assumption, the Allies planned to land at half tide, which, on June 6, 1944, came at 7:25 A.M. on Gold Beach.⁹

At 7:35 A.M. on June 6, the 231st Brigade landed in Normandy. The 1st Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment (1st Hampshire), landed near Le Hamel with the 1st Battalion, The Dorsetshire Regiment (1st Dorsets), landing ten minutes later. At 7:45 A.M. on the 69th Brigade's front, two companies of the 5th Battalion, The East Yorkshire Regiment (5th East Yorks), landed near La Riviere while two companies of the 6th Battalion, The Green Howards (6th Green Howards), landed just to the west near Mony Fleury.¹⁰ The

assault battalions were on time and in the correct positions. They were, however, the first elements to reach the beach, as poor weather and sea state prevented the amphibious tanks from swimming ashore. Instead of releasing the tanks at 7,000 yards from the beach, the landing craft delivered the much needed armor directly ashore shortly after the assault battalions landed.¹¹

The 5th East Yorks were initially pinned on the beach, but well directed naval gunfire from Force “G” and flail tanks from the 79th Armored Division soon broke out the stalled infantry. La Riviere, the battalion’s initial objective, would not be secured for several more hours, though. The 6th Green Howards, in contrast, quickly secured their sector of beach through effective infantry-armor cooperation and cleared the strong points at Hable de Heurtot and the Mont Fleury battery. During the move past the Mont Fleury battery, Company Sergeant Major Stan E. Hollis, seeing that the battery’s forward bunkers were still manned by Germans, single-handedly assaulted and cleared the battery’s remaining defenders. This was the first of several actions that earned Hollis, a veteran of Dunkirk, North Africa, and Sicily, the only Victoria Cross to be awarded on D-Day (see Appendix D for the complete citation of Hollis’ Victoria Cross). By 9:00 A.M., the 69th Brigade, having secured the eastern beaches, moved inland towards their first objectives.¹²

With the fall of La Riviere and the 69th Brigade moving inland, the 441st Ost Battalion began to pull back from its positions on the Meuvaines ridge. According to the commander of the 716th Division, General-Major Wilhelm Richter, the 441st “ran as soon as they could and we could not stop them.”¹³ To fill the gap in its defenses created by the disintegration of the 441st Ost Battalion, the LXXXIV Corps ordered its reserve to attack

towards Gold Beach. Stationed near Bayeux, the 915th Infantry Regiment and the other units of the reserve had practiced counter-attacks towards Crepon and Gold Beach many times.¹⁴ Unfortunately, when ordered to counter-attack, the corps reserve was twenty miles west of Bayeux. At 4:00 A.M. on June 6, the 915th received orders to move to the Carentan-Isigny area to attack a reported airborne landing there. When the reports of the landing proved to be false, the LXXXIV Corps ordered the 915th's battle group back towards Gold Beach, over twenty miles away. The early commitment of the corps reserve prevented any organized counter-attack in the Gold Sector until the late afternoon of D-Day.¹⁵

Gold Beach's western sector proved more difficult for the 231st Brigade. An attack by twelve Royal Air Force Typhoons armed with 1,000 pound bombs did not significantly affect the German battery at Le Hamel. The loss of a control ship during the run in to the beach meant the battery was not attacked by the afloat self-propelled artillery and the physical location of the battery protected it from naval gunfire. Bombs dropped by the United States' 8th Air Force fell well inland from the battery.¹⁶ The 1st Hampshire, supported by specialized armor from the 79th Armored Division, fought across the beach and eventually took the Le Hamel battery from the rear. This success came at great cost, though, as the battalion lost nearly 175 men, including two company commanders. Furthermore, the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel H.D. Nelson Smith was severely wounded and evacuated early in the assault.¹⁷

The 1st Dorsets landed east of Le Hamel, out of the range of its deadly 75mm gun, and moved inland within an hour of coming ashore. The specialized armor made quick work of the German defenses, swiftly clearing three exits for the Dorsets.¹⁸ With the

exception of the area near Le Hamel, the 231st Brigade had cleared the western sector of Gold by 10:30 A.M.¹⁹ At the same time, the 6th Green Howards achieved their first inland objective, while the 7th Green Howards secured their objective shortly after 11:00 A.M.²⁰ With seven of twelve exits from Gold Beach open, the reserve brigades began landing just before mid-day. Both the 151st and 56th Brigades had assembled inland by 12:30 P.M. At this point, with the majority of the 50th Division ashore, the beachhead was over three miles wide and two and a half miles deep.²¹ The 50th Division spent the remainder of D-Day fighting to expand the beachhead against pockets of German resistance.

At about 4:00 P.M., the German LXXXIV Corps' reserve battle group, led by elements of the 915th Infantry Regiment, finally arrived back in the Gold Beach sector, meeting the 69th Brigade near Villers-le-Sec. With some of its forces diverted to assist in the defense of Omaha Beach, the German battle group had only two battalions of infantry and ten 88mm anti-tank guns. The 69th Brigade quickly destroyed the German forces, killing their commander and forcing the surviving infantry back across the River Seulles. One German account states that only 90 men survived the encounter with the 50th Division.²²

Two hours later, the 69th Brigade reported forty tanks in the vicinity of Rucqueville. Most likely these were the self-propelled guns of the German 1352nd Assault Gun Battalion, as intelligence later confirmed that there were no tanks on the 50th Division's front on D-Day.²³ The threat of an armored counter-attack, however, was significant enough that at 10:00 P.M., Major-General Graham ordered the division to halt short of its objectives in order to consolidate and strengthen its positions.²⁴ By last

light, the division occupied a lodgment nearly six miles deep and six miles wide.²⁵ In all, the 50th Division's failure to take Bayeux on D-Day was not significant. During the night of June 6-7, the 56th Brigade conducted patrols in the outskirts of Bayeux and the city was liberated the following morning at 11:00 A.M. with minimal casualties.²⁶

Though the 50th Division had not accomplished all of its D-Day objectives, including the capture of Bayeux, it was well situated to complete its tasks on June 7. In all, the D-Day invasion had gone "stunningly well" and, arguably, no assault division had done as well as the 50th.²⁷ With minor exceptions, the amphibious assault was on time and in the correct locations, despite unfavorable weather and sea state.²⁸ The sea state made the shooting of self propelled artillery from the sea difficult, while haze impeded the targeting of shore batteries for the naval guns of Force "G" and the aircraft of the Royal Air Force.²⁹ During the run in to the beach, seasickness further compounded the difficulties which faced the cold and wet assault troops.³⁰

The German opposition ashore was greater than had been projected.³¹ With the German 352nd Division assuming the western half of the 716th Division's sector, the 50th met three infantry battalions on the beach, instead of the one they anticipated. Subsequently, the heavy German resistance prevented the formation and movement of the mobile force to Villers Bocage.³² While the German Panzer reserves did not arrive in the area until several days after D-Day, a mobile force moving so deep into German held territory would be taking a significant risk. With the Americans struggling on Omaha Beach on the 50th's right flank and Caen still firmly in German possession, a salient twenty miles deep to Villers Bocage would have dangerously exposed both flanks of the mobile force and placed it directly in line with the arrival of both the 12th SS Panzer and

Panzer Lehr Divisions. German commanders in Normandy later claimed that the delay by the German Army Command in the West to approve their request for the 12th SS Panzer, the 21st, and the Panzer Lehr Divisions to counter-attack the Allied invasion force allowed only the 21st Panzer Division, stationed near Caen, to enter the battle on D-Day. It can be argued that even if orders for the reserve Panzers had been issued earlier, the air supremacy achieved by the Allies would surely have hampered any effort by a Panzer division moving towards the Normandy beaches.³³

The British 2nd Army's success on D-Day can be attributed to three factors: numerical and material superiority, the integration of lessons learned from previous amphibious assaults, and months of preparation.³⁴ The use of specialized armor on Gold Beach no doubt reduced casualties among the British infantry and it has been argued that the American decision not to use specialized armor similar to that employed by the 79th Armored Division contributed to the high number of American casualties suffered on Omaha Beach.³⁵ For the 50th, the months spent in training for the amphibious assault had paid off—the division quickly overcame the beach defenses and was well into the Normandy countryside by mid-day. The intensive and exclusive amphibious assault training, however, was at the expense of traditional infantry training. By the afternoon of D-Day, the fear of coastal guns and beach obstacles was replaced by two threats the 50th would face throughout the next two months—snipers and mortars.³⁶

“Colossal Cracks”—Montgomery’s Operational Technique

Before examining the 50th Division’s performance after D-Day, this chapter will analyze the 21st Army Group’s operational methods and the subsequent effect on the 50th Division. It will be argued that the operational technique employed by General Bernard

L. Montgomery at the 21st Army Group level significantly impacted the tactical role and performance of the 50th Division in Normandy.

By June, 1944, the United Kingdom had been at war for nearly five years, joined with many nations seeking victory over Germany. To ensure its proper place in post war negotiations, the British desired both a large military and political role within the overall Allied effort—an effort significantly shouldered in early 1944 by the Soviet Union and the United States. From 1942 onward, limited man-power reserves and a fear that morale within the army was dangerously fragile constrained senior British commanders' freedom of action. To be part of the Allied victory, Britain would have to preserve its army by sustaining acceptable casualty numbers while maintaining its morale.³⁷ In the meantime, the British government sought solutions to its manpower problem, including the disbanding of divisions and re-assigning the men—a process begun in earnest in 1942. Senior army leaders, including Montgomery, adopted methods that preserved manpower through troop conservation.³⁸ Furthermore, Montgomery believed that as long as the British army could maintain its morale by avoiding defeat, the sheer quantity of Allied men and materials would eventually overwhelm the Germans and lead to victory.³⁹ Accordingly, the concepts of troop conservation, morale maintenance, and the exploitation of a material advantage became the foundation of the 21st Army Group's doctrine in northwest Europe.⁴⁰

In February, 1943, Montgomery briefed senior British officers that, “I limit the scope of my operations to what is possible and I use the force necessary to ensure success.”⁴¹ This should have come as no surprise to his fellow General Officers, as British doctrine stressed the importance of battlefield preparation.⁴² Montgomery

demonstrated at Alamein that he would not launch an operation until the preparation of the men and supplies available virtually guaranteed success. Drawing upon Montgomery's own characterization of his operational technique, historian Stephen Ashley Hart dubbed Montgomery's method as "Colossal Cracks:" "(When) I am ready I...hit hard, and quickly," and "(I) concentrate great strength at some selected place and hit the Germans a colossal crack."⁴³ Historian Adrian Lewis characterized Montgomery's campaigns as "meticulously planned, prepared, rehearsed, and methodically executed," yet at the same time failing to allow for improvisation or exploitation.⁴⁴ Montgomery, though, drew upon his training as British doctrine of the late 1920s and 1930s stressed the importance of consolidation on the objective before exploitation. Both the 1935 edition of *Field Service Regulations* and the 1938 issue of *Infantry Section Leading* taught this concept.⁴⁵

Before Montgomery could execute one of his "Colossal Cracks," the Allies fought in a large series of small tactical engagements to consolidate and expand the Normandy beachhead. Following the initial successes of D-Day, Montgomery defended the slow-down in operational pace as "inevitable" in order to establish and expand the beachhead, to provide rest for the assault units, and to receive new units while simultaneously maintaining the initiative.⁴⁶ Maintaining that offensive initiative, however, came before rest for the 50th Division. It remained on the front lines and in contact with German forces from D-Day until the first week of August.⁴⁷

On June 10, as the Allies continued to establish their beachhead, Montgomery cabled the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, with the plan for the conduct of the coming battle of Normandy: "My general policy is to

pull the enemy onto 2nd Army so as to make it easier for 1st (US) Army to expand and extend quicker.”⁴⁸ In his 1958 memoirs, Montgomery further defends his operational plan, which was to:

(draw) the main enemy strength on to the front of Second British Army on our eastern flank, in order that we might the more easily gain territory in the west and make the ultimate break-out on that flank, using the First American Army for that purpose.⁴⁹

For Montgomery, the requirement in the eastern sector of the Allied lodgment was not to gain terrain, but for hard fighting with the threat of a breakout. Ideally, this would force the Germans to commit their reserves there and not in the west.⁵⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to debate if Montgomery’s original, pre-invasion plan was to fix the Germans in the east while the Americans broke out in the west or if his plan was an adjustment made after D-Day and the failure to take Caen. The fact that he cabled Brooke on June 10 with the plan to fix the Germans in the east confirms that it was not a post-war reinterpretation to correct the perceived failures by the British 2nd Army and the Canadian 1st Army.⁵¹

“Colossal Cracks” as an operational technique has been characterized as a double-edged sword.⁵² While waiting for the “Colossal Crack” to be unleashed, the British and Canadian forces fought a battle of attrition, wearing down the German forces. This method seems to run counter to the idea of troop conservation and morale maintenance. Understanding the capabilities and limitations of the army he was leading, Montgomery believed that his method of detailed operational planning, flawless execution, and exploitation of the Allied material advantage for the “Colossal Crack” was the most effective way to employ the army and outweighed the physical and mental costs of

attrition warfare.⁵³ Despite its success on D-Day and its veteran status, the 50th Division was not part of Montgomery's "Colossal Cracks" planning. Instead the 50th waged Montgomery's battle of attrition to fix the Germans in the vicinity of Tilly-sur-Seulles and Villers Bocage from early June to early August. Historian Max Hastings sums up the experience for the British fighting both the 12th SS Panzer and Panzer Lehr Divisions as follows: "For the British 50th Division...the lyrical name of Tilly-sur-Seulles became a synonym for fear and endless death."⁵⁴

Cristot, Tilly-sur-Seulles, and Villers Bocage

The 50th Division spent June 7 completing its D-Day objectives, including linking its beachhead with the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division to the east and the American 1st Infantry Division to the west. The 8th Armored Brigade received orders later that night to form the mobile column that was initially planned for D-Day to seize Villers Bocage on the morning of June 8. Moving south from positions just east of Bayeux, the column advanced only as far as Tilly-sur-Seulles before encountering fierce enemy resistance. The Panzer divisions that had been delayed on D-Day had finally reached the front. On June 7, elements 12th SS Panzer Division arrived on the left flank of the 50th and elements of the Panzer Lehr Division arrived in Tilly-sur-Seulles on the following day.⁵⁵ The direct route to Villers Bocage was now blocked by two Panzer divisions.

With Caen still firmly in German possession, 21st Army Group launched Operation Perch on June 9. The intricate plan called for the envelopment of Caen to isolate its defenders and expand the beachhead. The 51st (Highland) Division would attack east out of the beachhead, then turn south past Caen, before turning west towards Cagny. The 7th Armored Division would attack south to Villers Bocage via Tilly-sur-

Seulles before turning east towards Evrecy. To complete the link-up, the British 1st Airborne Division would land in the vicinity of Evrecy and Cagny, thus joining the two arms of the ground forces.⁵⁶

Before the 7th Armored Division could seize Villers Bocage, the road through Tilly-sur-Seulles had to be opened. On June 9, the 50th Division once again ordered the 8th Armored Brigade's mobile column south, but added firepower by attaching the 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, to the brigade. Late on June 9, the column reached St. Pierre, a small village on the high ground just northeast of Tilly-sur-Seulles. Described by Brigadier James Hargest as an "excellent" combined arms attack, the mobile column took St. Pierre and dug in for the night.⁵⁷ Determined to re-take the village, the Germans launched a counter-attack early on June 10. Hargest recounts that some members of the 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, panicked while receiving German mortar fire and retreated to the previous day's start line. The result of this retreat, according to Hargest, was heavy casualties and the requirement to re-take the village.⁵⁸

Other accounts of the battle however, do not concur with Hargest's criticism of the 8th Battalion. While a regimental history may omit or gloss over a time of poor performance or weakness, the performance of the 8th Battalion on June 10 is, on the contrary, rather impressive. At 7:15 A.M., the Germans launched a heavy, combined arms counter-attack. The brunt of the German attack fell on C Company, a unit already depleted by the attack the night before. As a result, German forces quickly overran the weakened British defenders. The battalion's intelligence officer, Lieutenant P.M. Laws, assembled the remnants of the company and soon established a new defensive position.

D Company, facing elements of the 12th SS Panzer Division, was split and forced to withdraw. The tanks of the 8th Armored Brigade, stationed near Point 103, quickly responded. German anti-tank fire disabled the first tank to enter St. Pierre in the narrowest part of the street, effectively blocking the entrance to the town for the rest of the British armor. Effective German anti-tank fire further neutralized any other British tanks that sought alternate routes into the besieged village. A Company and the Battalion Headquarters Company were only able to stop the German attack in their sector through maximum, concentrated small arms fire from all available soldiers. Numerous examples of individual heroism helped stop the German attack by mid-day. The Germans seized the 8th Battalion's forward positions, but the village remained firmly in British hands.⁵⁹

On June 11, the 7th Armored Division attempted to break through the German resistance at Tilly-sur-Seulles. The Panzer Lehr Division and the elements of the recently arrived 2nd Panzer Division, however, had effectively deployed their infantry in ditches and destroyed houses, and emplaced well camouflaged tanks on the avenues of approach to the village. The German defenders had also emplaced obstacles on the roads, forcing the tanks of the 7th Armored into the adjacent woods. By using the dense bocage to maximum effect, the German forces denied the British armored forces mobility allowing infantry and snipers to stop the armored attack. To overcome the enemy resistance, the 7th Armored Division attached an infantry battalion to its armored brigade and attached an armored regiment to its infantry brigade. This technique proved successful and the 7th Armored reached the outskirts of Tilly-sur-Seulles. What is troubling, perhaps, is that in the fifth year of war, units such as the 7th Armored were just discovering the previously understood benefits of combined arms warfare. The 7th Armored was so impressed with

its “new” technique that the next day, the division released a message to the rest of 21st Army Group detailing their apparently innovative technique.⁶⁰

As the 7th Armored Division struggled to advance on June 11, the 69th Brigade fared much worse in its operation to capture Cristot and Point 102. Often cited as an example of the failure of British combined arms, the battle for Cristot and the surrounding areas was summed up succinctly by Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hastings: “Sunday 11 June was not a good day for 6th Green Howards.”⁶¹ At 7:15 A.M., Major-General Graham arrived at the 69th Brigade Headquarters and ordered the brigade to attack southeast from its base near Audrieu towards Cristot. The purpose of this attack was to cover the exposed left flank of the 8th Armored Brigade and the 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, presently occupying St. Pierre. The 5th East Yorks would then move to relieve the 1st Dorsets on the high ground of Point 103. Additionally, by moving the 69th Brigade’s front forward, the 50th Division would keep pace with the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division and seize the high ground at Point 102, south of Cristot.

Shortly after 8:00 A.M., Brigadier Knox and Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings met with Brigadier H.F.S. Cracroft, commander of the 8th Armored Brigade. Cracroft’s brigade had conducted a brief reconnaissance of Point 102 earlier that morning and provided as much information as possible on the terrain the 69th Brigade would find in its advance. He was not able to provide accurate information on the enemy dispositions, though, as his troops had encountered only scattered German infantry. Cracroft attributed this to a lack of Germans in the vicinity of Point 102. Hastings, however, was convinced that the Germans were in the vicinity, but hiding and waiting for the main assault before revealing themselves.⁶² With the attack scheduled to begin at 2:30 P.M., Hastings had

limited time to conduct his own reconnaissance before issuing orders to his battalion at 10:00 A.M.⁶³ The brigade would attack with two battalions forward, the 6th and 7th Green Howards, with the 5th East Yorks moving towards Point 103. Supporting the attack would be the tanks of the 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards and artillery from the 147th Field Regiment and two batteries of the 90th Field Regiment. The short timeline, combined with a lack of intelligence as to the enemy's disposition, precluded the preparation of a detailed fire support plan.⁶⁴

With the tanks of the 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards in the lead, the 6th Green Howards crossed the start line at 2:30 P.M. Unbeknownst to the British, the German SS-Panzeraufklärungsabteilung 12 (12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion) had moved into the area around Cristot earlier in the day. Advancing through the dense bocage, the tanks of the 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards soon became separated from the infantry as the battalion approached Cristot, at around 5:00 P.M. The German defenders allowed the unescorted British armor to pass by their positions before they opened fire and quickly neutralized seven of the nine Royal Dragoon Guards' tanks from the rear. By 6:00 P.M., the 6th Green Howards' advance had stopped about three hedgerows from Cristot. Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings then committed his reserve company and the attack regained momentum. An hour later, elements of the 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion began to advance and infiltrate the 6th Green Howards. Nonetheless, by 8:30 P.M. the 6th Battalion had nearly achieved its objective at Point 102, despite having suffered significant casualties. Hastings then learned of a German armored force attacking across the 6th Battalion's axis of advance. After a quick conferral with Brigadier Knox, Hastings ordered the battalion to retreat west to the high ground of Point 103 to avoid being cut off

from the rest of the brigade.⁶⁵

The 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion suffered nearly 70 casualties during the attack on Cristot.⁶⁶ The 6th Green Howards, though, suffered nearly 250 casualties, including two company commanders killed and one wounded.⁶⁷ The 7th Green Howards was also unsuccessful in its advance to the east as the battalion was stopped by heavy machine gun fire along the Bayeux-Caen railroad embankment near Brouay. The 5th East Yorks, caught in the open while moving to relieve the 1st Dorsets, suffered heavy casualties during the artillery bombardment that preceded the 12th SS Panzer Division's counter-attack on Point 103. While the 6th Green Howards may have disrupted the German infantry forming for the attack on Point 103, the Panthers pressed the attack and overran the forward positions of the 5th East Yorks. The advancing German armor, without its supporting infantry, was soon stopped at the firm base held by the 1st Dorsets and elements of the 8th Armored Brigade. The German attackers withdrew to the east at about 10:30 P.M.

The same concept that had failed the British in the attack had saved them in the defense—effective infantry-armor coordination in the dense terrain of Normandy. The attack on Cristot, though a failure, was planned according to the January, 1944, 21st Army Group infantry-armor doctrine. The 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards wrote after the battle:

This was the first time that we made an attack with infantry on an objective, planned according to the book, and as such it was a dismal failure. The theory which had been preached for the combined tank and infantry attack was that the attack should go in waves, with tanks followed by infantry, followed by more tanks. Experience soon showed that to have the tanks leading at all was a mistake; that in close country they must go side by side with the infantry...In conditions such as existed, not only were the odds high against the attacker, and casualties both for tanks and infantry high in proportion, but also extremely difficult for a tank to watch its own infantry, even when it was moving with them.

In this attack on Cristot, therefore, where the tanks led the infantry, it was no time at all before the two had got separated and were dealt with individually by the enemy.⁶⁸

With so much of the pre-invasion training dedicated to the amphibious assault and other training conducted in terrain drastically unlike the unique bocage of Normandy, British infantry and armor units were forced to develop new doctrine under fire and at a high cost. Following the Cristot battle, the newly arrived 49th Division relieved the 69th Brigade on June 12. The 69th Brigade then went to the rear for three days of rest and re-fit.

While the 69th Brigade failed in its attempt to seize Cristot due to a lack of combined arms integration, authors such as David French, Timothy Harrison Place, Max Hastings, and John Buckley have all used the 49th Division's operation to seize Cristot as an example of effective infantry-armor cooperation.⁶⁹ Ultimately, on June 16, British forces captured Cristot with an infantry battalion, a squadron of tanks, and artillery fire from four field regiments and seven medium regiments. The British suffered only three killed and 24 wounded, all in less than two hours. While the 49th Division found 17 dead Germans in the village, it noted that there was no counter-attack. This attack was a success as the infantry and armor alternated leading the assault as dictated by the terrain. Like the 7th Armored Division, the 49th released a message to 21st Army Group detailing their successful combined arms tactics with an "Immediate Report from Normandy."⁷⁰

There is no doubt that the 49th Division demonstrated sound tactics, but what is omitted by the above authors is the fact that German forces had withdrawn from Cristot the night prior. The 49th Division did not know this fact, as it stated in its "Immediate Report" that the "strength of the enemy was not known..."⁷¹ Late on June 15, the new

commander of the 12th SS Division, Standartenführer (Colonel) Kurt Meyer visited the 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion in Cristot and ordered his unit to withdraw. That night, the reconnaissance battalion mined the roads and withdrew its forces, leaving only a few soldiers in the village to maintain contact with the attacking British—a significantly smaller force than the one faced by the 69th Brigade.⁷²

By the evening of June 11, the American 1st Infantry Division, having recovered from its near disastrous landing on Omaha Beach, had moved as far south as Caumont, creating a gap in the German forces west of Tilly-sur-Seulles. Unable to break through at Tilly-sur-Seulles, the 7th Armored received orders to utilize roads in this gap to the west in order to reach Villers Bocage (see figure 9). The 50th would then take over the western half of the XXX Corps' front, maintaining pressure on the Panzer Lehr and 12th SS Divisions while the 7th Armored flanked the stubborn German resistance.

On June 12, the 50th Division relieved the 7th Armored Division near Tilly-sur-Seulles. The 7th Armored then proceeded to the west and then turned south, towards Villers Bocage. The division stopped its advance at last light on June 12, but resumed early on the 13th. By early morning, the division occupied the main road through Villers Bocage while its forward elements moved towards the high ground of Point 213. Though the division was deep into enemy territory, the men of the 7th Armored Division exercised poor march discipline and security procedures. With the column stopped in Villers Bocage, vehicles bunched up and many soldiers left their tanks for tea or food, leaving the division exposed and vulnerable to possible attack.

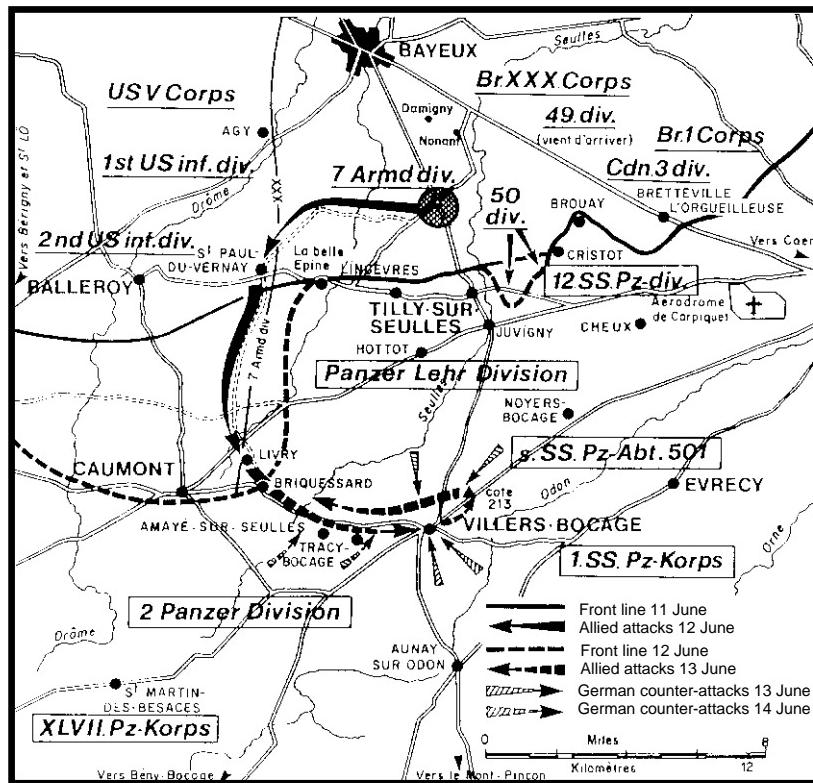


Figure 9. Operation Perch.

Source: Georges Bernage, *The Panzers and the Battle of Normandy* (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 2000), 85.

Around 8:30 A.M., a single German Tiger tank emerged from the woods southeast of Villers Bocage. Commanded by SS-Obersturmführer (Lieutenant) Michael Wittmann, this single Tiger moved along the startled British column destroying eleven tanks, nine half-tracks, four troop carriers and two anti-tank guns before being disabled by a British anti-tank gun.⁷³ Simultaneously, Tiger tanks from the 101st Heavy SS Panzer Battalion attacked the 7th Armored's lead elements near Point 213. The battle raged throughout the day, with elements of both the Panzer Lehr Division and 101st Heavy SS Panzer Battalion attacking to expel the 7th Armored Division from Villers Bocage. Although the village was still in British hands late that afternoon, the 7th Armored Division believed its position to be untenable and withdrew to the west at the

end of the day. The 7th Armored Division had lost nearly 400 men in the battle for Villers Bocage. The airborne assault was not attempted, as the 51st (Highland) Division had failed to break out of its beachhead near Caen. Operation Perch had failed. The XXX Corps, though still determined to take Villers Bocage, ordered the 50th Division on June 13 to attack through Tilly-sur-Seulles and to take the high ground near Hottot in order to set the conditions for follow-on operations to re-take Villers Bocage.⁷⁴

For the next four days, the 50th fought to capture Tilly-sur-Seulles. The battle, a series of British attacks and German counter-attacks, saw the steady improvement of combined arms tactics within the 50th Division. Not only did the division successfully integrate infantry, armor, and artillery, but the division also employed Royal Air Force fighter-bombers and naval gunfire.⁷⁵ For the 6th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, the attack on June 18 was its best performance so far in Normandy:

Once the attack began there was no stopping it...after just two and a half hours of fighting...(the battalion) was on its objective...It had been the most successful attack of the campaign to date and the perfect cooperation of tanks, infantry and guns had given an immense boost to the morale and confidence of everybody; and, what is more, casualties had not been heavy.⁷⁶

On June 19th, the 50th Division captured Tilly-sur-Seulles and was on the northern edge of Hottot, a little over six miles from Villers Bocage. Brigadier Hargest noted that even after two weeks of near-continuous combat, the morale of the division was still high.⁷⁷ The commander of the 12th SS Panzer Division, Standartenführer (Colonel) Kurt Meyer, described the 50th's attack on Tilly-sur-Seulles as "relentless."⁷⁸ As the 50th mastered combined arms tactics, the Panzer Lehr Division analyzed how to defeat the British. After two weeks in combat, the Germans had learned that, even at the brigade and battalion level, commanders were employing Montgomery's methods of slow,

methodical, set piece battles that were reliant on overwhelming fire support.⁷⁹ Critical of the British tendency to remain on the objective and their failure to exploit the advantage, the Panzer Lehr Division concluded that “it is best to attack the English, who are very sensitive to close combat and flank attacks at his weakest moment—that is when he has to fight without artillery.”⁸⁰ While the 50th was unable to break through the combined resistance of the Panzer Lehr, 12th SS Panzer, and 2nd Panzer Divisions, it had successfully defended its beachhead, which included the vital artificial port at Arromanches.

The 50th Division now entered into period of static, attrition-style warfare. It maintained its current position in the vicinity of Tilly-sur-Seulles for nearly a month. While unsuccessful in its efforts to capture Villers Bocage, the division succeeded in fixing and attriting the three Panzer Divisions it faced. After the battle for Tilly-sur-Seulles, Standartenführer Meyer visited one of division’s aid stations and commented:

The constant arrival of wounded, without any battle taking place, makes us all think. The conduct of the operations is such that the Panzer divisions are being decimated by naval gunfire and low flying aircraft without being able to fight. It can’t go on like this anymore! The Panzer divisions must regain freedom of movement.⁸¹

At the conclusion of the fighting in the vicinity of Tilly-sur-Seulles and Villers Bocage during the third week of June, Panzer Lehr commander Lieutenant General Fritz Bayerlein stated that his “chance to drive to the sea was lost. We lost about a hundred tanks against the British.”⁸² For the remainder of the battle of Normandy, it was the responsibility of the 50th Division to maintain contact with the Panzer divisions, denying them the mobility they so desperately desired.

The July Battles and the Breakout

The 50th Division spent the last week of June and the first three weeks of July holding a position north of Hottot. The division was active, however, through patrols, frequent raids, and repulsing numerous armored counter-attacks.⁸³ The division made numerous attempts to seize Hottot, including attacks on July 8 by the 56th Brigade and on July 11 by the 231st Brigade. The 56th Brigade made good progress and captured its objective, the main road west of Hottot. Later that afternoon, the Panzer Lehr Division counter-attacked with three companies of infantry supported by nearly 30 Panthers, driving the 56th Brigade back across the road.⁸⁴ Three days later, the 231st Brigade attacked Hottot with the objective capturing the village. Supported by armor and an intricate artillery fire plan, the 1st Hampshire and 2nd Devons reached the northern edge of the village, but no further. The battle raged throughout the day and into the next with little ground gained by either side. While both attacks by the 56th and 231st Brigades achieved some gains, even combined infantry-armor operations could not break the hold that the Panzer Lehr held on the village.⁸⁵ Not until July 18 did the 50th finally take Hottot, but only after the Germans had abandoned their defensive positions as a result of the threat posed by British 2nd Army operations on their eastern flank near Caen (Operation Goodwood) and American 1st Army operations to the west near St. Lo.

With Hottot finally under British control, the XXX Corps was finally poised to capture Villers Bocage and to drive on to the River Noireau, though this advance was now a month behind the pre-invasion prediction. Nonetheless, the 50th Division, along with the British 2nd Army, had indeed accomplished its task of fixing German armor units along its front. By drawing seven of the nine Panzer divisions in Normandy on to its

front, the British 2nd Army had successfully set the conditions for the American 1st Army to launch Operation Cobra and ultimately break-out from the Normandy beachhead on July 25.⁸⁶

Morale

One of the major challenges faced by British and Canadian leaders in Normandy was the maintenance of morale. Indeed, historians have repeatedly used poor morale as evidence in their case against the 50th Division.⁸⁷ In 1946 the British Army of the Rhine published a 24 page booklet titled: *Morale in Battle: Analysis*. Featuring a Foreward by Montgomery, the booklet was intended to analyze morale in battle and, more specifically, how to develop and maintain that morale. Drawing upon the lessons learned in the war, the booklet concluded that “THE MORALE OF THE SOLDIER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE FACTOR IN WAR” (emphasis original).⁸⁸

For the British soldier, morale was generally high on D-Day and the days immediately following. Troops that had been training in the United Kingdom for the past four years were anxious to do their part, while the veteran soldiers of the 50th, believing they had done their part, were not so keen to return to combat. Throughout the British 2nd Army, however, morale significantly declined as the excitement of D-Day dissipated and the fighting in Normandy evolved into a slow battle of attrition.⁸⁹ Indeed, high morale was difficult to maintain while fighting a committed and highly proficient enemy possessing superior armored forces in terrain that favored the defense. Constant enemy mortar and sniper fire placed men on edge, while the lack of successful advances left British soldiers with nothing to show for their sacrifices. Heavy casualties, especially in the officer ranks, during both offensive operations and the battle of attrition along the

front resulted in a further decrease in morale. British officers, instead of characterizing their difficulty as a “morale” problem, used the terms “stickiness” or “battle exhaustion” to describe a unit or soldier that may not be giving, or able to give, the maximum effort.⁹⁰ To handle men unfit for duty, the XXX Corps, in what was perhaps a organizational response to an anticipated problem, established a Corps Exhaustion Center on June 14 (D+8).⁹¹

In North Africa, each British corps was assigned a psychiatrist who directed a Corps Exhaustion Center.⁹² The goal of the exhaustion center was to treat men suffering from battle exhaustion and return them to service. In contrast, the Australians used local, front-line treatment of rest, sedation, and counseling at Tobruk in 1941. Their logic was that by not removing the soldier from the line and his unit, he would be more inclined to return to his friends. The British 8th Army was reluctant to use forward treatment, instead using specially designated casualty clearing stations. British medical officers reasoned that if treatment (i.e. time out of the immediate front line) was too easily accessible, men would give into their fears and head towards the safety of the rear.⁹³

In Normandy, Regimental Medical Officers were instructed to treat acute cases of battlefield exhaustion with sleep and counseling to restore the soldier’s individual sense of security. Once ready to return to the front, soldiers were placed back in their original unit, to reinforce the feeling of commitment and belonging.⁹⁴ While the British regimental system has been criticized for many things, to include impeding army transformation and for making individual personnel replacement difficult, medical officers capitalized on community ties of units to return a soldier to the line.⁹⁵ As most regiments were regionally based, the soldiers fighting together in Normandy, should they

survive, would return to work and life together back home in the United Kingdom. Rare is the soldier who wants to be known as the man who couldn't handle the pressure of combat.

By June 18 (D+12), the XXX Corps Exhaustion Center had 63 patients from the 7th Armored Division and 40 Patients from the 50th Division. Of those 103, 75 were combat veterans from the Mediterranean, 25 were previously wounded, and 65 had already shown a neurotic reaction to stress in combat.⁹⁶ The majority of these men, however, did not return to their units as they required additional treatment. In June, the exhaustion center returned less than fifteen percent of its patients to the line. Though by July, the number of soldiers able to return to combat increased significantly as each division opened its own exhaustion center. Using methods similar to those employed by the Australians at Tobruk, division medical officers found that by keeping men within the "family" of the division and within the sound of the guns, they could return to the front nearly fifty percent of the exhaustion cases they admitted for care.⁹⁷

In addition to treating battlefield exhaustion cases, commanders in the 50th Division dealt with a large number of absences without leave (AWOL) and desertion cases. Throughout the British army, historical data shows the number of desertions rose significantly during periods of positional warfare. The 50th, being no exception, suffered the majority of its desertions and AWOLs during the period that the division held the front line from mid-June to early-August.⁹⁸ Indeed, from June to August, 1944, the British 2nd Army convicted 615 men for desertion or being AWOL. 225 of those men were 50th Division soldiers. In August alone, 150 of the 367 2nd Army soldiers convicted for the above crimes were from the 50th.⁹⁹ At first inspection, these numbers seem to

indicate significant morale and discipline problems within the 50th Division—problems unique within the British 2nd Army. Despite the negative impression offered by these typical morale indicators, closer inspection reveals that the 50th did not suffer a significant problem.

Commanders in the field had a wide range of options to deal with AWOLs and desertions—they did not have to resort to courts martial to punish offending soldiers. These “alternate punishments” are not reflected in the 2nd Army’s conviction numbers.¹⁰⁰ In July, the 2nd Army Judge Advocate found that commanders were not punishing AWOLs and deserters correctly and issued a message reminding commanders of their responsibility to properly charge AWOL/deserting soldiers with the appropriate crimes.¹⁰¹ It appears that Major-General Graham, however, was not one of the lenient commanders, unlike the leaders of the 51st (Highland) Division. Although Montgomery declared the 51st “not battle worthy” mid-way through the campaign due in part to morale issues, the 51st only convicted nine soldiers for AWOL or desertion during the period from June to August, 1944.¹⁰²

On June 6, 1944, the 50th Division was nearly 38,000 men strong.¹⁰³ A typical British infantry division, in contrast, commanded only 18,347 men, while a typical armored division commanded 14,964 men.¹⁰⁴ Even with the subtraction of the 56th Brigade (nearly 2,500 men), which was not assigned to the 50th for the entirety of the Normandy campaign, the 50th was still a significantly larger formation than any of its sister divisions in Normandy.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, these numbers alone would result in the 50th having the largest proportion of AWOL and desertion convictions in the 2nd Army. Ultimately, when the 978 soldiers convicted by the British 2nd Army for AWOL and

desertion from June to September, 1944, are compared with the 2nd Army's total strength of roughly 420,000 in July, 1944, it is a significantly small number.¹⁰⁶

While the 50th had problems with battle exhaustion and morale they, unlike the 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) Divisions, never reached levels that negatively impacted the division's combat performance.¹⁰⁷ On July 22, Lieutenant-General John T. Crocker, commander of the British I Corps, refused orders from his higher headquarters, the Canadian 1st Army, to launch an operation aimed at clearing Ouistreham and the Caen Canal. Crocker replied that his corps, which contained both the 51st (Highland) and 3rd Infantry Divisions, "had no troops fit or available for any such operation."¹⁰⁸ Two days later, Crocker reported to the Canadian 1st Army that the 3rd Infantry Division, which had been in action since D-Day, was "tired and had shown obvious signs of (battlefield) exhaustion."¹⁰⁹ Fortunately for the British army, the American break-out in late July (Operation Cobra) put the Allies firmly on the offensive. In early September, by Montgomery's assessment, "there (was) no morale problem."¹¹⁰

Many accounts of the British army in Normandy imply that morale was average to poor and that the battle was won not by the soldier, but by the mass of materials the Allies had available to them.¹¹¹ Furthermore, it has been alleged that the idea of poor morale has been furthered by wartime commanders eager to mask their own tactical failures by blaming an army-wide morale problem.¹¹² While the division's training, equipment, and British army doctrine certainly influenced the 50th's battlefield performance, the 50th did not suffer from poor morale to a degree that it could not be effective on the battlefield, as did other units in the British 2nd Army. Admittedly, the 50th did not enjoy high morale throughout the campaign, but it was certainly not the worst

in the army. Interestingly, with morale maintenance being such an apparent priority as well as a constraint on British military leaders, it is puzzling that there is no analysis of morale in the United Kingdom's official history of the Normandy Campaign, *Victory in the West*.¹¹³

The Other Veteran Divisions

On July 28, as the American 1st Army broke out of its western Normandy beachhead, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower cabled General Montgomery, praising the British General's campaign plan: "(I) am delighted that your basic plan has brilliantly begun to unfold with General (Omar N.) Bradley's initial success."¹¹⁴ To aid the American breakout in western Normandy, the British 2nd Army launched Operation Bluecoat with a thrust towards Mont Pincon and Vire on July 30. The 50th Division's first objective was Villers Bocage and, after a slow start in the face of receding German opposition, captured the town that had eluded the division for nearly two months on August 4. The following morning, the 7th Armored Division assumed control of the entire corps front. The 50th Division, out of the front line for the first time since, D-Day, spent the next three days resting and reorganizing.¹¹⁵

XXX Corps' slow rate of initial progress placed the success of Operation Bluecoat in jeopardy. On August 4, 1944, Montgomery relieved the corps commander, Lieutenant-General Gerard Bucknall. Hand-picked by Montgomery to command XXX Corps, Bucknall commanded the I Corps in the summer of 1943. To prepare him for combat in Normandy, the British army reduced Bucknall in rank and assigned him a division to command in Sicily in order for him to gain combat experience.¹¹⁶ Through the efforts of the 50th Division, XXX Corps succeeded on D-Day. During the battle for

Normandy, however, Bucknall “kept getting out of position.”¹¹⁷ Montgomery, who praised Bucknall for his detailed planning and caution, felt that the corps commander was “always twenty-four hours late” and later admitted that he made an error in appointing Bucknall to command XXX Corps.¹¹⁸ Montgomery, however, was not finished with changes in his senior leadership. He also relieved Major-General G.W.E.J. Erskine, commander of the 7th Armored Division on the same day as Bucknall. Montgomery also ordered the transfer of over 100 officers and soldiers within XXX Corps, all of whom were Mediterranean veterans, to other posts.¹¹⁹

In Bucknall’s place, Montgomery appointed Lieutenant-General Brian G. Horrocks. Horrocks, Montgomery’s original choice to command XXX Corps, was injured in North Africa and needed until the summer of 1944 to recover.¹²⁰ In his first meeting with Lieutenant-General Dempsey, Horrocks learned that the veteran divisions had been “sticky” and had not performed as well as the green divisions.¹²¹ When Horrocks met his corps, which contained two of the three veteran divisions from North Africa, he noted that after two months of combat “the gloss had been taken off” of the formation.¹²²

Major-General G.L. Verney, the new commander of the 7th Armored Division, observed on the day he took command that:

Two of the three divisions that came back from Italy at the end of 1943, the 7th Armoured and 51st Highland, were extremely ‘swollen headed’. They were a law unto themselves: they thought they need *only obey those orders that suited them*. Before the battles of Caumont I had been warned to look out for the transport of the 7th Armoured on the road—their march discipline was non-existent. Both these divisions did badly from the moment they landed in Normandy. They deserved the criticism they received... (emphasis original).¹²³

Although Lieutenant-General Richard O’Connor, VIII Corps Commander, characterized

the 7th Armored's performance in mid-July's Operation Goodwood as "rather disappointing," Montgomery had been concerned about the battle weariness of the veteran divisions since very early in the campaign.¹²⁴

Upon their return from the Mediterranean, the 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) Divisions did not undergo the large turnover of personnel that the 50th experienced.¹²⁵ At first, such a large concentration of experience in a division may be viewed as an asset. Familiarity with combat, however, does not make a soldier anxious to return to fighting. Montgomery observed that the veteran divisions were "apt to look over their shoulder and wonder if it is all OK behind or if the flanks (were) secure..."¹²⁶ Horrocks believed that some divisions never recovered from a bad first battle (7th Armored) or from being in combat too long (51st). According to Horrocks, it is up to the higher commander to assess the performance of a division as there is no definition of when a unit should be pulled from the line. One sign exhibited by all of the veteran divisions, however, was the feeling that they were shouldering a significant part of the fighting even though, in their view, they had done their part in the Mediterranean. Knowing the horrors of combat and believing that it was time for other units to fight, the veteran divisions lacked the spirit and drive of a green division.¹²⁷ A lack of spirit and drive, however, did not prevent the 50th from holding its place in the line and fixing elements of the 12th SS Panzer and Panzer Lehr Divisions for nearly two months.

The 50th Division's performance in June pleased Montgomery, whereas the 51st (Highland) had not performed as well.¹²⁸ On July 15, Montgomery sent a message to Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke stating that the 51st (Highland) Division "does not (not) fight with determination and has failed in every operation it has been given to do. It

cannot (cannot) fight the Germans successfully” (repetition original).¹²⁹ Judging the division “not (repeat not) battle worthy,” Montgomery relieved its division commander, Major-General D.C. Bullen-Smith, a week and a half later and even considered returning the 51st to the United Kingdom for re-training.¹³⁰

During the breakout from Normandy, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill requested an assessment of the veteran divisions’ performance. Montgomery replied on September 2:

Generally it can be said that the veteran Divisions were best on D Day and for the first few weeks but that the UK trained divisions then caught them up and are now the best. You will remember that in January last I took a number of senior officers from the experienced divisions and posted them across the UK divisions. This paid a very good dividend and these officers taught battle technique and procedure to the UK divisions. Divisions that have been fighting for three years are now getting tired. The best divisions in 21 Army Group are now the UK divisions like the 15 43 49 53 11 Arm(ore)d G(uar)ds Arm(ore)d and NOT repeat NOT divisions like the 50 51 and 7 Arm(ore)d.¹³¹

Montgomery’s assessment of the 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) appears to have been correct. According to Lieutenant-General Horrocks, those two divisions, living on their reputations from the desert, found an “entirely different type of battle, fought under different conditions of terrain.”¹³² Historian Russell A. Hart, using the examples of Villers Bocage and the 51st,’s “not battle worthy” assessment, argues that the veteran divisions could not, or would not, adjust to the conditions found in Normandy.¹³³ Yet when the criticism of the “veteran” divisions is analyzed in depth, it emerges that the majority of the “veteran” problems were concentrated with the 7th Armored and the 51st (Highland) Divisions and not the 50th.

Without a full understanding of the critical role the 50th played in the Normandy campaign, Montgomery’s message to Churchill gives the appearance that the 50th

suffered from the same issues that affected the other veteran divisions. The reason that the 50th was not one of the best divisions in 21st Army Group is the fact that, on September 2, the division had been in near-continuous combat for three months. The division was tired and in need of rest and reorganization, not re-training or a change of senior leadership.¹³⁴

Final Battles

While the 50th Division was out of the line resting and reorganizing, XXX Corps captured Mt. Pincon. This gave the British 2nd Army command of the highest terrain in Normandy. As the American 3rd and the Canadian 1st Armies converged, a pocket of German resistance formed near Falaise. The XXX Corps received orders to maintain the western boundary of the pocket and prevent any breakout attempt in that direction. By moving south and capturing Conde-sur-Noireau, the XXX Corps could hasten the encirclement. With the 50th Division out of the line, the mission of capturing St. Pierre-la-Vielle, a town roughly half way between Mt. Pincon and Conde-sur-Noireau, fell to the 7th Armored Division. The dense bocage once again made progress difficult for the tanks. On August 9, the XXX Corps returned the 50th Division to the line, ordered it relieve the 7th Armored Division, and to resume the attack on St. Pierre-la-Vielle. Despite a determined German resistance that included heavy artillery, mortars and dense minefields, the 50th captured St. Pierre-la-Vielle during the night of August 12-13. The 50th then exploited their success. Early on August 12, with St. Pierre-la-Vielle still in German hands, the 151st Brigade seized the high ground east and south-east of St. Pierre-la-Vielle, while the 231st Brigade surged south towards Conde-sur-Noireau, denying the Germans a fall back position. Three days later, the 50th Division captured Conde-sur-

Noireau and on August 19, the Allies completed the encirclement of the remaining German forces in Normandy. The trapped Germans finally surrendered on August 21, 1944, ending the battle for Normandy. Following the August battles, Lieutenant-General Horrocks commended the victorious, yet tired 50th Division: “I cannot give you higher praise than by saying that the most experienced battle-fighting Division in the British Army has once more lived up to its high reputation.”¹³⁵

The 50th Division in Normandy—An Assessment

The Germans soldiers manning the coastal defenses of Normandy were not of the same caliber of soldier as those faced by the 50th in North Africa. However, the best equipped division in the German army, the Panzer Lehr Division, and 12th SS Panzer Divisions were “prepared to die rather than surrender” according to Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, the 50th continued to engage and successfully wear down the Panzer divisions. A captured “Strength Return” for the Panzer Lehr dated June 25 revealed that since D-Day, the division had lost 160 officers and 5,400 men. Furthermore, the division had only 66 of its original 190 tanks remaining.¹³⁷ Author Stephen Ashley Hart has even proposed that annihilation of the Panzer divisions may explain their high performance. As the divisions suffered large casualties, new, fresh troops came forward. In essence, the Germans re-fitted their Panzer divisions while on the front line.¹³⁸ With Allied fighter-bombers free to hunt the Normandy countryside and Allied divisions on both flanks also fighting German armor, the 50th Division cannot exclusively claim to have caused so much damage to the Panzer Lehr. While the 50th certainly contributed to the above totals, its greatest contribution was the hard fighting it produced in its section of the front controlled by the British 2nd and Canadian 1st Armies.

By projecting the threat of a breakout and thus attracting the majority of the Panzers onto the eastern section of the Normandy beachhead, the British and Canadians set the conditions for the Operation Cobra to succeed.¹³⁹ The cost to the 50th Division, however, was high. By the end of June, 312 officers and 3,662 other ranks were casualties, the highest of any division in Normandy. At the end of the August, the 50th had suffered 474 officer and 6,156 other ranks total casualties. Among the British forces, only the 3rd Infantry Division suffered greater casualties during the campaign.¹⁴⁰

Addressing the officers and men of the 69th Brigade on August 6, Lieutenant-General Horrocks commented he was “particularly glad” to command the XXX Corps and even more pleased to have the 50th Division in his corps. Horrocks further went on to say that the 50th had the “highest reputation for stubborn fighting” in the opinion of both the civilians in the United Kingdom and the senior British commanders in Normandy, with whom Horrocks had met in recent days.¹⁴¹ In his 1961 autobiography, Horrocks addressed the issues faced by the North Africa veteran divisions, specifically the 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) Divisions. While these two divisions were “not at their best” in Normandy, they both improved and finished the war in “magnificent shape,” according to Horrocks.¹⁴² Notably, Lieutenant-General Horrocks does not include the 50th Division in his discussion of the “troubles” of the veteran divisions, only mentioning that he saw the evidence of two months of sustained combat in the 50th when he took command in August, 1944.¹⁴³

When the 50th’s overall combat performance is viewed in the context of their employment by the 21st Army Group and the British 2nd Army, Major-General Roberts’ assessment of the veteran divisions at the beginning of this chapter is only partially

correct. The 50th certainly did not have the “dash” of a fresh division, but this was not a reflection of their “veteran” status, rather, two months of hard fighting on the front line had indeed exhausted the 50th Division. The command decision to include the division in the amphibious assault on D-Day was sound, as it achieved all of its objectives within 36 hours of landing. What is debatable, however, is the 21st Army Group’s decision to leave the division in the line for two months straight without a rest—the majority of the Normandy campaign.

¹1952 letter to Sir Basil Liddell Hart cited by Patrick Delaforce in *Churchill's Desert Rats: From Normandy to Berlin with the 7th Armoured Division* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1994), 10.

²CAB 44/243: Committee of Imperial Defence, Historical Branch and Cabinet Office, Historical Section: War Histories: Draft Chapters and Narratives, Military, War of 1939-1945 (Operation “Overlord,” “D” day 1944).

³CAB 44/243.

⁴CAB 44/243.

⁵CAB 44/243. The 47 Royal Marines (Commando) was placed under 50th Division command during the assault phase of the invasion. 47 RM Commando landed two hours after the 231st Brigade, bypassed Le Hamel, and moved towards their D-Day objective, Port-en-Bessin. Heavy casualties during both the assault and the overland movement forced the Commandos to stop for reorganization just two miles from Port-en-Bessin. The Commandos, who captured the Port-en-Bessin on June 7, did not fight as part of 50th Division during later operations in Normandy and therefore will not be further discussed in this study.

⁶Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1952), 270.

⁷A Duplex-drive tank had two propellers for propulsion while in the water and used its treads while on land. A regiment consisted of a headquarters squadron and three tank squadrons. A squadron had four troops of four tanks each (L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), 536-537).

⁸CAB 44/243.

⁹Wilmot, 270.

¹⁰WO 171/513: Allied Expeditionary Force, North West Europe (British Element): War Diaries, Second World War (50 Infantry Division, 1944 Jun-Jul).

¹¹WO 223/7: Staff College Camberley, 1947 Course Notes on D-Day Landings and Ensuing Campaigns (50 Div: Notes by Maj.-Gen. Graham, 1943 – 1944); and CAB 44/243.

¹²L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), 176-177.

¹³Tim Saunders, *Gold Beach-Jig* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002), 96.

¹⁴Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1951), 321.

¹⁵Ibid., 321.

¹⁶L.F. Ellis, 174.

¹⁷David Scott Daniell, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment*, Vol. III, 1918-1954 (Eastbourne: Antony Rowe Ltd., 1955), 218-219.

¹⁸L.F. Ellis, 175; and Wilmot, 271.

¹⁹WO 223/7.

²⁰WO 171/513.

²¹L.F. Ellis, 209; and Wilmot, 272.

²²L.F. Ellis, 210-211.

²³CAB 44/243.

²⁴WO 171/513.

²⁵Wilmot, 272. On typical Normandy day in early June, first light was about 4:45 A.M., with last light being about 11:15 P.M. (CAB 106/963).

²⁶WO 223/31.

²⁷Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 111.

²⁸CAB 44/243. The weather was scattered clouds at 1,000 feet with an overcast layer at 10,000 feet. The sky was 9/10 obscured and the wind was out of the west at Force 4 (11-16 knots).

²⁹WO 223/4: Staff College Camberley, 1947 Course Notes on D-Day Landings and Ensuing Campaigns (50 Div: The Artillery Story, 1943 – 1944); WO 223/31: Staff College Camberley, 1947 Course Notes on D-Day Landings and Ensuing Campaigns (6 Bn. Green Howards: account of operations, 1944 June).

³⁰Wilmot, 269.

³¹CAB 44/243.

³²W.A.T Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards, 1939-1945* (Richmond: The Green Howards, 1952), 287.

³³L.F. Ellis, 236.

³⁴Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2001), 306.

³⁵Robin Neillands, *The Dieppe Raid: The Story of the Disastrous 1942 Expedition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 268.

³⁶WO 223/31.

³⁷Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation and 'Colossal Cracks': 21st Army Group's Operational Technique in North West Europe, 1944-1945." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (Dec 1996): 133, 150.

³⁸David French, "Tommy Is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1996): 132, 242.

³⁹Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation..." 139.

⁴⁰John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 49-50.

⁴¹David French, *Raising Churchill's Army-The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 243.

⁴²Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 90.

⁴³Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation..." 133, 139; Quotation found in a Montgomery letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, November 17, 1944, as cited in Stephen Ashley Hart's *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007), 2.

⁴⁴Adrian R. Lewis, *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 132.

⁴⁵French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 25.

⁴⁶Bernard L. Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic* (Germany: Printing and Stationary Service-British Army of the Rhine, 1946), 70-71.

⁴⁷E.W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950), 267-268.

⁴⁸David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 331.

⁴⁹Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 227-228.

⁵⁰Ibid., 228.

⁵¹While Montgomery devotes a 36 page chapter in his *Memoirs* to the preparation for the battle of Normandy, he allocates only a single, 13 page chapter to the battle of Normandy. Furthermore, the bulk of the Normandy chapter is not a description of the action, but a defense of his plan.

⁵²Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation," 150.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Max Hastings, 128.

⁵⁵Fraser, 329.

⁵⁶Wilmot, 302.

⁵⁷CAB 106/1060: Reports on the Normandy campaign 1944 June 6-July 10, by Brigadier James Hargest, New Zealand Army Observer with 30th Corps.

⁵⁸CAB 106/1060. Hargest is mistaken about the date of the attack in his report, stating that the action in St. Pierre occurred on June 11. The German counter-attack came on June 10, while the morning of June 11 was relatively quiet. See P.J. Lewis and I.R. English, *Into Battle with the Durhams: 8 D.L.I. in World War II* (London: The London Stamp Exchange, Ltd., 1990), 246-252; David Rissik, *The D.L.I. at War* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 1952), 242-243; and B.S. Barnes, *The Sign of the Double 'T'* (Kingston Upon Hull: Sentinel Press, 1999), 109-112.

⁵⁹Lewis and English, 246-252; and Rissik, 243.

⁶⁰CAB 106/963. Immediate Report from Normandy No. 3.

⁶¹WO 223/31. See Max Hastings, 136-137; and Buckley, 100.

⁶²Robin Hastings, *An Undergraduate's War* (London: Bellhouse Publishing, 1997), 129.

⁶³WO 171/651: Allied Expeditionary Force, North West Europe (British Element): War Diaries, Second World War (69 Infantry Brigade, 1944 Jun-Aug).

⁶⁴CAB 44/247: Committee of Imperial Defence, Historical Branch and Cabinet Office, Historical Section: War Histories: Draft Chapters and Narratives, Military, War of 1939-1945 (Operations 1944 June 7-16 ("D" day plus one to "D" day plus ten).

⁶⁵CAB 44/247.

⁶⁶Michael Frank Reynolds, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (New York: Sarpedo, 1997), 89.

⁶⁷Synge, 305-306.

⁶⁸Quote from *The First and the Last: The Story of the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards 1939-1945* by J.D.P. Stirling as cited in CAB 44/247.

⁶⁹See French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 265; Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2000), 129-130; Max Hastings, 209; and Buckley, 100.

⁷⁰CAB 106/963. Immediate Report from Normandy No. 6.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Hubert Meyer, *The History of the 12. SS-Panzerdivision "Hitlerjugend"*, Translated by H. Harri Henschler, (Winnipeg: J.J. Federowicz Publishing Inc., 1994), 76; and Kurt Meyer, *Grenadiers*, Translated by Michael Mende (Winnipeg: J.J. Federowicz Publishing, 1994), 132.

⁷³George Forty, *Villers Bocage* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 65-66.

⁷⁴CAB 44/247. 50 (N) Division Operating Instruction No.8, 13 Jun 44.

⁷⁵Rissik, 245-249; and Clay, 260-264.

⁷⁶Rissik, 248.

⁷⁷CAB 106/1060.

⁷⁸Kurt Meyer, 132.

⁷⁹John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 380-381; and Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 278.

⁸⁰French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 7.

⁸¹Kurt Meyer, 130.

⁸²Ronald Lewin, *Montgomery as Military Commander* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 202.

⁸³WO 171/513.

⁸⁴Barnes, 124.

⁸⁵Daniell, 224-227.

⁸⁶WO 223/7; British Army of the Rhine, *Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, 6 June 1944-5 May 1945*, 1945; Lewin, 205; and Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Normandy: The Real Story-How Ordinary Allied Soldiers Defeated Hitler* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 20.

⁸⁷See Carlo D'Este's *Decision in Normandy*, Stephen Ashley Hart's *Colossal Cracks*, and Max Hastings' *Overlord*.

⁸⁸British Army of the Rhine, *Morale in Battle: Analysis* (Germany: Printing and Stationery Service, British Army of the Rhine, 1946), 24.

⁸⁹French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 171.

⁹⁰Stephen Ashley Hart, "Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation...," 137.

⁹¹Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 114.

⁹²French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 162.

⁹³Terry Copp, "Battle Exhaustion in WWII." [Legion Magazine](#). Available from <http://legionmagazine.com/features/canadianmilitaryhistory/98-01.asp>. Internet; accessed 12 Mar 2007.

⁹⁴Copp and McAndrew, 109.

⁹⁵French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 123.

⁹⁶French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 166.

⁹⁷Copp and McAndrew, 132.

⁹⁸French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 142, 172.

⁹⁹French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 172-173.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 158.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²D'Este, 274; and French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 172.

¹⁰³Clay, 236.

¹⁰⁴L.F. Ellis, 535.

¹⁰⁵The 56th Brigade, a XXX Corps asset, also fought under the 7th Armored Division. George Forty, *British Army Handbook: 1939-1945* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1998), 165; and H.F. Joslen, *Orders of Battle*. Vol. 1, *United Kingdom and Colonial Formations and Units in the Second World War 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1960), 296.

¹⁰⁶French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 158.

¹⁰⁷Buckley, 204.

¹⁰⁸Stephen Ashley Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 28.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 32.

¹¹¹French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 154.

¹¹²French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 122.

¹¹³*Victory in the West* contains three references to the high morale that the troops had on the eve of D-Day (pp. 131, 145, 159).

¹¹⁴Whitaker and Whitaker, 20.

¹¹⁵WO 171/514: Allied Expeditionary Force, North West Europe (British Element): War Diaries, Second World War (50 Infantry Division, 1944 Aug).

¹¹⁶David French, “Invading Europe: The British Army and its Preparations for the Normandy Campaign, 1942-1944.” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 2 (June, 2003): 285.

¹¹⁷Brigadier “Pete” Pyman, XXX Corps Staff, as quoted by French, “Invading Europe,” 289.

¹¹⁸French, “Invading Europe,” 289.

¹¹⁹Whitaker and Whitaker, 98.

¹²⁰French, “Invading Europe,” 286; and Brian Horrocks, *Corps Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 28.

¹²¹Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 28.

¹²²Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London: Collins, 1961), 186.

¹²³Delaforce, Churchill's Desert Rats, 10.

¹²⁴French, “Invading Europe,” 279; and *Raising Churchill's Army*, 243.

¹²⁵D'Este, 271-272.

¹²⁶Whitaker and Whitaker, 98-99.

¹²⁷Horrocks, *A Full Life*, 187; and *Corps Commander*, 28-29.

¹²⁸Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Battles of Field Marshal Montgomery* (New York: Random House, 1994), 303.

¹²⁹French, “Invading Europe,” 279.

¹³⁰D'Este, 274.

¹³¹French, “Invading Europe,” 290.

¹³²Horrocks, *A Full Life*, 187

¹³³Russell A Hart, 308.

¹³⁴The official British history of the campaign, *Victory in the West*, only mentions the changes of command for XXX Corps and the 7th Armored Division on August 4, 1944, and offers no insight as to why the commanders were relieved (p. 402).

¹³⁵Clay, 272.

¹³⁶WO 223/31; The Panzer Lehr Division was fully mechanized—the only Panzer division so equipped. See Russell A. Hart, 307.

¹³⁷Wilmot, 320.

¹³⁸Stephen Ashley Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 31.

¹³⁹British Army of the Rhine, Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, 6 June 1944-5 May 1945, 1945.

¹⁴⁰D'Este, 278.

¹⁴¹WO 171/651.

¹⁴²Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London: Collins, 1961), 187.

¹⁴³Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Well done, 50 Div.¹

Lieutenant-General Brian C. Horrocks
Commander, XXX Corps

Breakout, Market Garden, and Disbandment

Following the breakout from Normandy, the 50th Division fought the retreating German army in a series of small battles across France and into Belgium. After the failure of Operation Market Garden in mid-September, 1944, the 50th held a position in Holland between Arnhem and Nijmegen for the next two months. On November 29, 1944, fresh formations relieved the 50th and the division moved from its forward position in Holland to Belgium. This ended the combat action of the 50th Division in World War II.

By the end of October, 1944, the 21st Army Group suffered from a manpower deficit of roughly 14,500 men. Faced with a projected shortage of 18,040 men by the end of November and 22,300 men by the end of December, the 21st Army Group decided in early November to cannibalize the 50th Division and distribute its trained infantrymen throughout the remaining divisions of the group.² The remainder of the division would return to the United Kingdom in skeleton form where it would provide training cadres. The commander of the 21st Army Group, Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, initially considered removing one of the Scottish divisions, but latter settled on the 50th Division.³ Citing low strength and battle weariness, Montgomery believed that he could no longer count on the 50th in an offensive role.⁴ In an attempt to stop the break-up of the 50th,

Prime Minister Winston Churchill suggested alternatives in early December such as the addition of Royal Marines to the 50th. Churchill feared that the loss of a division would weaken the 21st Army Group front.⁵ During the month prior, however, the 21st Army Group had already begun the dismantlement of the 50th by diverting replacements to other formations and removing the 50th from the line. Churchill, after learning how far the dismantling process had moved, issued a message on December 12 which permitted the 21st Army Group to complete the cannibalization of the 50th. In a telegram to Montgomery, Churchill wrote, “I greatly regret the destruction of 50th Division as a fighting force, but as you have gone so far, I fear the process must be completed.”⁶

Other Assessments

Historians are divided on the performance of the 50th Division in Normandy. In *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*, Max Hastings writes that the 50th’s performance was “very good” and that the division did not suffer the same problems of the 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) Divisions.⁷ In his commentary of the 6th Green Howards at Cristot, however, Max Hastings infers that the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hastings, did not agree with the mission and therefore his unit did not give one hundred percent to the effort. The nearly 250 casualties suffered by the Green Howards in the battle, however, speak to the effort expended. Recounting the withdrawal from Cristot, Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings wrote that he “walked back down the lane of death, leaving a great part of (his) battalion dead among the Normandy hayfields.”⁸ Carlo D’Este’s *Decision in Normandy* is more critical of the 50th. Drawing upon the observations of Brigadier James Hargest, *Decision in Normandy* highlights the tactical shortcomings and morale issues faced by the 50th. D’Este states, however, that

the 50th did not experience the same problems as the other veteran divisions.⁹

Other historians, in contrast, are more critical of the 50th Division. Stephen Ashley Hart deems the decision to use the veteran divisions in Normandy a “serious mistake” and that only through the “inspired leadership” of the “outstanding” Major-General D.A.H. Graham was the 50th able to overcome its earlier problems.¹⁰ David French judges the performance of the veteran divisions “lackluster” and that Montgomery made a mistake in featuring the veteran divisions so prominently in the battle for Normandy. French uses combat evidence such as the 7th Armored Division’s defeat at Villers Bocage and the “not battle worthy” assessment of the 51st (Highland) Division in his evaluation of the other veteran divisions. In his case against the 50th, his argument centers on morale issues and the decision to disband the division in late 1944.¹¹ By not emphasizing the combat performance of the 50th and focusing on battle weariness, French overlooks key evidence regarding the 50th Division’s performance. Furthermore, French proposes that the decision to remove the 50th was based more on performance than army-wide personnel shortages. Citing continually declining morale throughout the campaign in northwest Europe, French argues that the manpower crisis gave Montgomery an “excuse to send the division home.”¹² Certainly the condition of the 50th Division in December, 1944, was worse than it had been six months earlier on D-Day, but it is incorrect to include a decision made three months after the battle of Normandy in an assessment of fighting performance in Normandy. Other factors such as the division’s readiness following Market Garden and two months on the line in Holland surely influenced Montgomery.¹³ Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks saw the fatigue in the division when he took command of the XXX Corps in early August. A further three

months of fighting had definitely taken its toll on the 50th.

Many historians have focused on battle weariness when assessing the performances of the veteran divisions in Normandy.¹⁴ This thesis argues that battle weariness and the subsequent problems of “stickiness,” AWOL, and desertion did not significant affect the 50th Division’s ability to carry out its assigned missions. John Buckley’s *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* also challenges the link between battle weariness and poor veteran performance. The 4th Armored Brigade, veterans of North Africa and Sicily, fought throughout the entire Normandy campaign with no accounts of poor morale or performance. Fellow Mediterranean veteran 8th Armored Brigade split upon its return to the United Kingdom, retaining one veteran armored regiment while sending its two remaining regiments to the 27th and the 29th Armored Brigades, respectively. Like the 4th Armored Brigade, no issues of morale or battle weariness emerged from any of these formations.¹⁵ Ultimately, while battle weariness and the resultant psychological cases, AWOLs, and desertions concerned British commanders, the numbers never reached a magnitude that jeopardized the performance of the 50th Division or the British army as a whole.¹⁶ Major Roy Griffiths of the 9th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, attributed the struggles of the veteran divisions in Normandy not to morale, but to the difficult bocage country:

Some books I read after the war about morale of the troops who came back from the desert, that the reason why there was a slow advance in Normandy was because we were rather wary of and inexperienced in the Bocage country because we were so used to the wide open spaces of the desert. But no-one was experienced in the Bocage country.

There were these high hedges at the sides of the roads and no-one was experienced and the people who got the most stick, quite honestly, were the lads in the tanks, because they couldn’t see. They could see straight up the roads, but they couldn’t see over the high hedges and what was in the cornfields... It is true

to say, that when we achieved our objectives we were never pushed off. What we took we held always and to say that morale was low in 50th Infantry Division or 7th Armd Div is absolutely arrant nonsense and it makes my blood boil.¹⁷

Therefore there is no consensus in the historical record on the effects of battle weariness and performance in Normandy. While historians debate the issue, veterans of the campaign are quite clear that battle weariness was not an issue that significantly impacted their fighting capabilities.

The Bocage and Combined Arms Integration

In its pre-invasion training, the British army did not fully appreciate the terrain it would face in Normandy and instead focused its invasion preparations almost exclusively on how to defeat the beach defenses.¹⁸ The ease of concealment in the distinctive Normandy bocage, with its sunken roads and dense hedgerows, required close cooperation between infantry and armor forces. Ideally, those forces would have been organized and trained together. The intense amphibious assault preparations, however, prevented integrated training prior to the invasion.¹⁹ While the failure of combined infantry-armor tactics led to defeats at Cristot and Villers Bocage, lack of training was not solely responsible.

A prevailing attitude existed within the armored forces that tanks alone could win the battle. In a clear example, Brigadier Hargest recommended to the 7th Armored Division commander to integrate infantry with his armor after observing the in division action. Major-General G.W.E.J. Erskine replied that he preferred to “go on alone.” While Hargest praised the combined attack on St. Pierre by the 8th Armored Brigade and the 8th Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, he noted that “in nearly every other action, the tank’s tactics have been bad.” During the battle for Tilly-sur-Seulles, Hargest

described the performance of the tanks as “incredibly bad.” Hargest believed the armored forces did not possess the will to fight, and that the tanks were “badly led and fought.”²⁰

Brigadier Hargest found the performance of the artillery within the 50th Division to be “rather splendid,” but criticized the 50th Division infantryman for relying too much on artillery and not using weapons organic to the infantry battalion. Those weapons, however, were no match to the superior weapons possessed by the defending Germans. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on artillery was in line with both 21st Army Group doctrine and Montgomery’s own operational technique, as the British had made a deliberate decision to use overwhelming firepower to support their advances.

While artillery was effective, the bocage made its use difficult and terrain often neutralized the mechanical superiority enjoyed by the Allies.²¹ Like the 1940 Arras attack, the tanks at Cristot outran their accompanying infantry and the 50th Division suffered the same result—defeat. Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings assessed tanks as “useless” except when fighting enemy counter-attacks.²² The doctrine of 1944 was a significant improvement over the doctrine of 1941, yet it was still not perfect. By effectively integrating lessons learned in combat and refining training, the 21st Army Group developed a doctrine that succeeded on D-Day.²³ This doctrine also provided a good starting point for adaptation to the unique enemy and terrain of Normandy, but required significant modification once the battle moved beyond the beaches. Unfortunately, the British army developed their new doctrine under fire and paid for it at great cost to its soldiers.

Further Research

While this thesis has analyzed the influence of the 21st Army Group on the 50th Division, the 50th's higher headquarters, the XXX Corps, deserves a critical examination. Commanding two of the three veteran divisions, the XXX Corps certainly had a key role in the successes and failures of both the 50th and 7th Armored Divisions. Decisions made at the corps level definitely influenced operations of the subordinate divisions. There is, however, little published about operations at the XXX Corps level in Normandy. Thus a detailed study will require extensive primary source research at The National Archives of the United Kingdom.²⁴

Another factor influencing the performance of the 50th that warrants additional research is the senior leadership of the division. As many studies of the British army in Normandy focus on the 21st Army Group level, Montgomery has received the majority of the leadership analysis. With the regimental histories covering the battalion and company commanders, there exists a gap in the historical record regarding the leadership of the 50th Division's commander, Major-General Graham, and his brigade commanders. Specifically, Graham, the commander of the largest British division on D-Day, is mentioned only once in the United Kingdom's official history of the Normandy campaign, listed as the 50th's commander in an order of battle table in Appendix J.²⁵ Even less is mentioned of the brigade commanders. In comparison, the commanding generals of the American assault divisions are each mentioned numerous times in the official American history of Normandy, with many other books articles and written on their leadership.²⁶

50 Div—Combat Effective

According to Montgomery, he never had any intention of breaking out of the Normandy beachhead in the east with British and Canadian forces, nor did he have any reason to change his master plan once the battle began. Apparently even Eisenhower failed to fully understand the plan he “cheerfully” approved.²⁷ While historians will continue to debate Montgomery’s plan compared with its execution, it is certain that British and Canadian forces performed a vital role in the east of the beachhead. Montgomery estimated that the British 2nd and Canadian 1st Armies fixed seventy-five percent of German armor in Normandy.²⁸ Lieutenant-General Horrocks refined those numbers, estimating that at the beginning of August, fourteen British and Canadian divisions faced fourteen German divisions with 600 Panzers, while the nineteen American divisions in the west faced only nine German divisions and 110 Panzers. The constant pressure placed on key terrain at places such as Tilly-sur-Seulles and Villers Bocage forced the Germans to commit their reserves and reinforcements piece meal, affecting command and control and denying the Panzers the mobility they desired.²⁹

Currently, the United States military uses the problem solving construct of DOTMLPF (Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and education, Personnel, and Facilities) to assess a unit’s current capabilities and to manage transformation.³⁰ While DOTMLPF is a modern evaluation tool, it offers an effective framework with which to analyze the 50th Division’s performance. British combined arms doctrine evolved throughout the war, albeit slowly, and sometimes in the wrong direction. The 50th Division underwent considerable organizational changes and was a radically different formation on D-Day than it was in September, 1939. Training for the

invasion was effective, as the division quickly got ashore and inland on D-Day. Focusing exclusively on the beach assault in the months leading up to the invasion, however, in effect stunted the 50th's development of effective combined arms tactics, forcing the division to develop those tactics and inter-arm relationships while in combat.

The weapons (materiel) used by the 50th were inferior to those employed by the Germans in Normandy. To mitigate this weakness, the Allies relied on numerical materiel advantage combined with the heavy use of artillery, naval gunfire, and air support. On D-Day, the 50th possessed a large number of combat veterans among both the leadership and personnel of the division. Though combat experience did not make the men of the 50th eager to return to battle, they did know Montgomery's "tricks of the battlefield." In the 50th's preparation for Normandy, the training facilities assigned to the division were inadequate. Small training areas prevented the division from operating as a complete combined arms organization. Additionally, the terrain did not replicate the bocage, again forcing the desert veterans to adapt to new conditions while in combat.

With a clear understanding and appreciation of the constraints that divisions of the 21st Army Group operated under and the forces they faced, it emerges that the harsh criticism of their combat performance is not justified. Facing a better equipped enemy in terrain favoring the defense, the 50th Division performed well. While the division certainly struggled to adapt to the bocage and was forced to develop infantry-armor tactics under fire, the 50th most certainly did not suffer from the serious problems of its fellow veteran divisions. Senior leaders in Normandy agreed. While fellow veteran divisions 7th Armored and 51st (Highland) were pulled from the line due to poor performance, the 50th (Northumbrian) Division only came off of the front line for 48

hours late in the campaign to rest and re-fit—a testament to its hard fighting and satisfactory performance.

¹E.W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950), 272.

²WO 216/101: Infantry requirements of 21 Army Group and the effect on India: reduction of 50 Infantry Division to training cadres. Message from D.C.I.G.S to C.I.G.S., November 2, 1944.

³WO 216/101. Message to the Prime Minister, November 3, 1944. Montgomery was promoted from General to Field-Marshal on September 1, 1944. That same day, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower assumed command of all Allied ground forces in northwest Europe. Montgomery retained command of the 21st Army Group, which contained the British 2nd Army and the Canadian 1st Army (L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1(London: HMSO, 1962), 476).

⁴WO 216/101. Message from D.C.I.G.S to C.I.G.S., November 2, 1944

⁵WO 216/101. Prime Minister's Personal Minute, December 3, 1944.

⁶WO 216/101. Personal telegram, Prime Minister to Field-Marshal Montgomery, December 12, 1944.

⁷Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 48.

⁸Robin Hastings, *An Undergraduate's War* (London: Bellhouse Publishing, 1997), 134.

⁹Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 277-281.

¹⁰Stephen Ashley Hart, *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007), 29, 31.

¹¹David French, "Invading Europe: The British Army and its Preparations for the Normandy Campaign, 1942-1944." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 2 (June, 2003): 277-279; and "Tommy Is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1996): 154-178.

¹²French, "Invading Europe," 279.

¹³The 50th Division suffered 1,718 casualties from September to November, 1944 (Clay, 313).

¹⁴See D'Este, Chapter 16; Max Hastings, 162-163; Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2001), 308; and French, "Tommy Is No Soldier," 166.

¹⁵John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 204-205.

¹⁶David French, *Raising Churchill's Army-The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁷George Forty, *Villers Bocage* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 107-108.

¹⁸Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2000), 75; and French, "Invading Europe," 282.

¹⁹David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 329; and French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 281.

²⁰CAB 106/1060: Reports on the Normandy campaign 1944 June 6-July 10, by Brigadier James Hargest, New Zealand Army Observer with 30th Corps.

²¹Fraser, 331.

²²WO 223/31: Staff College Camberley, 1947 Course Notes on D-Day Landings and Ensuing Campaigns (6 Bn. Green Howards: account of operations, 1944 June); and Ronald W. Andidora, *Home by Christmas: The Illusion of Victory in 1944* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2001), 51-52.

²³Place, 172.

²⁴R.G. Gill's *Club Route in Europe: The story of 30 Corps in the European campaign* (Hanover: W. Degener (1946)) provides a very broad narrative of the corps' operations from Normandy to V-E Day. Due to the size of the document, the XXX Corps' War Diary, presently held at The National Archives of the United Kingdom, was unavailable for thesis.

²⁵L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), 528.

²⁶Major Generals Charles H. Gerhardt (29th Infantry Division), Clarence R. Huebner (1st Infantry Division), and Raymond O. Barton (4th Infantry Division) are referenced six, four, and six times, respectively, in the index. See Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1951).

²⁷Bernard L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, K.G. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 228-229.

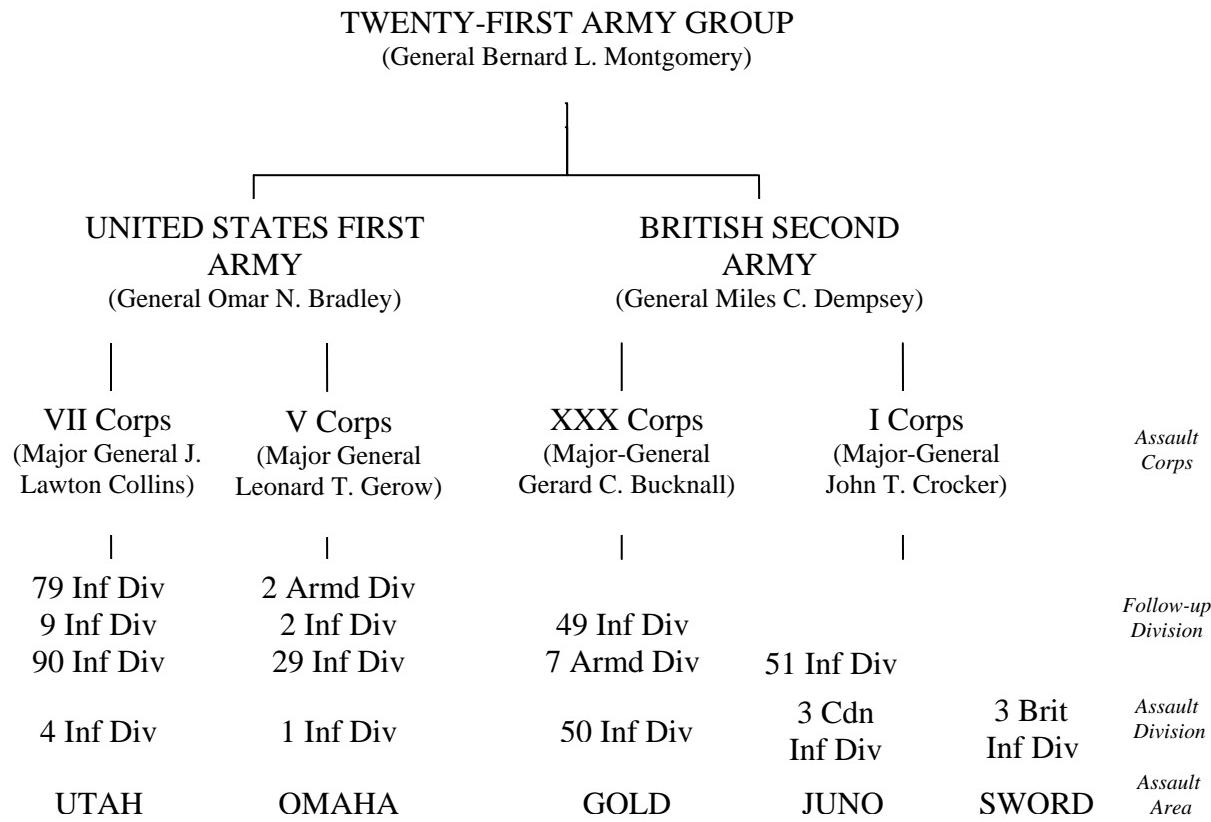
²⁸John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 377.

²⁹British Army of the Rhine, *Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, 6 June 1944-5 May 1945* (1945), 13.

³⁰U.S. Army, *FM-1 The Army* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 14 June 2005), Paragraph 4-11.

APPENDIX A

21st Army Group—June, 1944



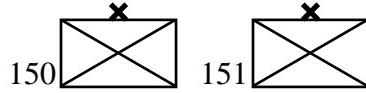
Source: L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), 79.

APPENDIX B

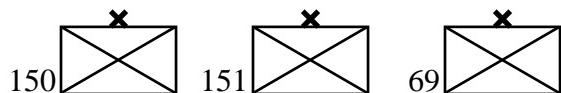
Infantry Brigades of the 50th Division

Date:

September 3, 1939-
 June 30, 1940
(Mobilization, Fall of France, Dunkirk evacuation)



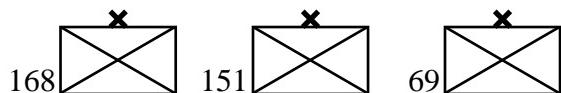
July 1, 1940-
 June 1, 1942
(Re-constitution, Deployment to Mediterranean, Destruction of 150th BDE at Gazala)



June 2, 1942-
 April 26, 1943
(El Alamein, Libya, Mareth Line)



April 27, 1943-
 October 10, 1943
(Tunisia, Sicily)



October 11, 1943-
 February 19, 1944
(Re-deployment to Great Britain, Invasion training)



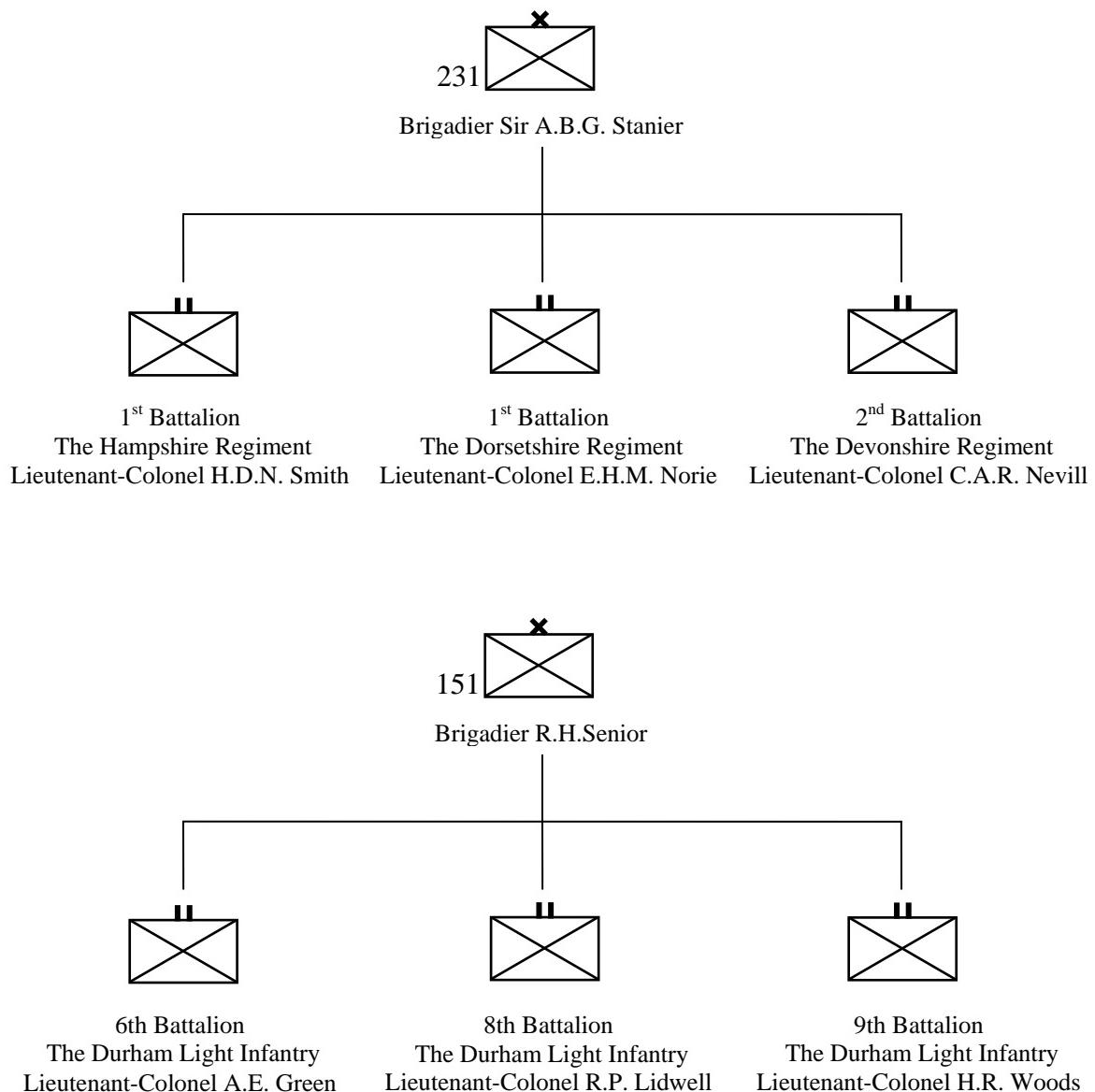
February 20, 1944-
 September 1, 1944
(Invasion training, D-Day, Normandy)

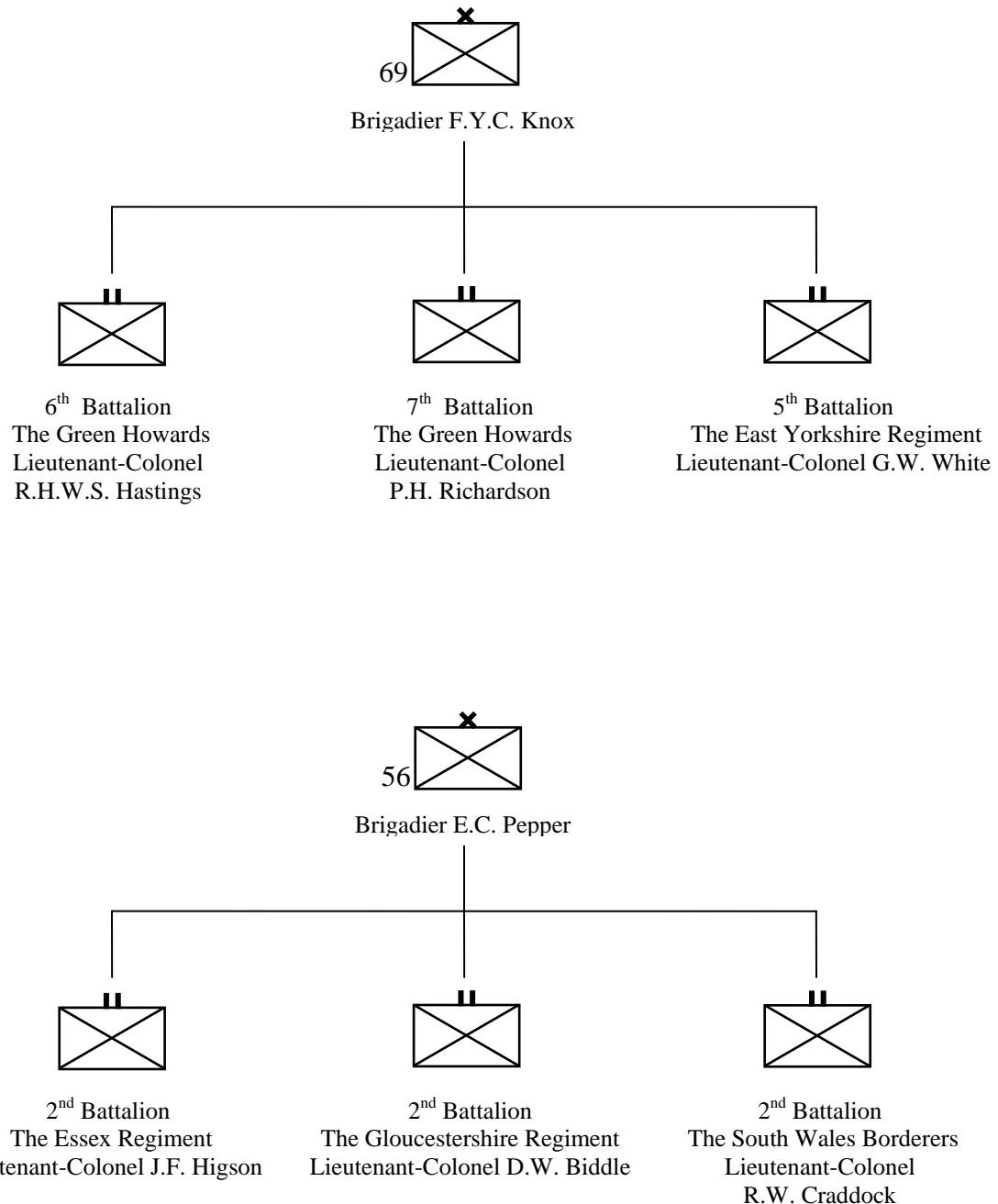


Source: H.F. Joslen, *Orders of Battle. Vol. 1, United Kingdom and Colonial Formations and Units in the Second World War 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1960), 81-82.

APPENDIX C

Infantry Battalions of the 50th Division in Normandy—June, 1944





Source: E.W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950), 307-309.

APPENDIX D

Victoria Cross Citation for WO2 Stanley E. Hollis, August 17, 1944

On D-Day during a assault on the Mont Fleury battery, CSM Hollis's Company Commander noticed that two of the pill boxes had been by-passed and tasked his CSM to ensure they were cleared. At short range the pill box machine gun opened fire. CSM Hollis instantly rushed box, firing his Sten gun. He jumped on top of the pill box, recharged the magazine, threw a grenade in through the door, fired his Sten gun into the box - killing two Germans and making the remainder prisoners. He then cleared several Germans from a neighbouring trench. By this action he undoubtedly saved his Company from being fired on heavily from the rear, and enabled them to open the main beach exit. Later, in Crepon, the Company encountered a field gun and machine gun. CSM Hollis was put in command of a party to cover an attack on the gun. Hollis pushed forward to engage with a PIAT. He was observed by a sniper who fired and grazed his right cheek and at the same moment the gun swung round and fired at point blank range at the assault party. CSM Hollis moved his party to an alternative position, by which time two of the enemy gun crew had been killed and the gun destroyed. He later found that two of his men had stayed behind and immediately volunteered to get them out. In full view of the enemy, who were continually firing at him, he went forward alone using a Bren gun to distract their attention from the stranded men. Under cover of his diversion, the two men were able to get back. Wherever fighting was heaviest CSM Hollis appeared, and in the course of a magnificent day's work he displayed the utmost gallantry and on two separate occasions his courage and initiative prevented the enemy from holding up the advance at critical stages.

Source: "The Yorkshire Regiment - History." The British Army. Available from http://www.army.mod.uk/yorkshire_regiment/regiment/history/vc_and_gc.htm. Internet; accessed 17 July 2007.

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